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RAJENDRA PRASAD



[Courtesy: Hindu, Madras]

Dr. Rajendra Prasad receiving the greetings of Jawaharlal Nehru
on his seventy-sixth birthday.

RAJENDRA PRASAD

FIRST PRESIDENT OF INDIA

BY

KEWAL L. PANJABI, I.C.S. (Retd.)



MACMILLAN & CO LTD

LONDON BOMBAY CALCUTTA MADRAS MELBOURNE

NEW YORK • ST. MARTIN'S PRESS

1960

MACMILLAN AND COMPANY LIMITED

London Bombay Calcutta Madras Melbourne

THE MACMILLAN COMPANY OF CANADA LIMITED

Toronto

ST. MARTIN'S PRESS INC.

New York

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MADE IN INDIA AT THE I. S. S. D. PRESS, MADRAS 2.

PREFACE

‘ I AM by nature shy and bashful ’, says Dr. Rajendra Prasad in his Autobiography. Like the tender mimosa he shuts up at any attempt by alien hands to pry into his inner thoughts and intuitions. This habit of reserve has deprived the people of an intimate picture of the man whom they respect and admire—and who is today not only the Head of the State but the true voice of the people of India.

I have had the good fortune of coming into personal contact with him. In 1946 I was in the Ministry of Food when Dr. Rajendra Prasad took over the portfolio of Food and Agriculture. I had numerous occasions of coming into close contact with him, not only in the Ministry, but also after he left the Ministry and became the President of the Constituent Assembly and later the President of the Indian Republic. His modest and unassuming nature does not advertise itself. In fact, he prefers to remain in the background and to push the cause that he serves to the forefront. His habit of reticence has characterised his Autobiography, wherein he reveals little of the internal conflicts and contradictions which he has subdued in shaping his life. After assuming office as President, he has been further subjected to the rigours of his post, which on most occasions makes him the mouthpiece of the Government—suppressing his personal views on many questions. These limitations have deprived the country of an intimate picture of his personality, which is rich and full of colour. It occurred to me that a biography of him, which would give a living portrait of the man, would be of great interest, and particularly to the new generation, which knows little of the struggle for freedom in which Dr. Rajendra Prasad played a key role. For a successful outcome this struggle needed a variety of talents each contributing to the ultimate end. Mahatma Gandhi had an uncanny gift for picking out his colleagues and grooming them separately for the part they were to play in the life of the nation. In Jawaharlal Nehru he saw the dynamism of youth that never ages and the idealism that holds fast to its dreams. He also valued Jawaharlal's deep understanding of the forces operating in international affairs, and knew that this would be a great asset to the new India. In Sardar

Vallabhbhai he saw robust realism, undaunted valour and skill in handling men and concluding negotiations successfully. In Dr. Rajendra Prasad he saw a great deal of himself, his living faith in God, his humility of spirit, his habit of disinterested action and his devotion to *Dharma*. Pandit Motilal Nehru described Dr. Rajendra Prasad as a 'hundred per cent *chela* (disciple) of Gandhiji'. The bond that subsisted between these three stalwarts of freedom was their intense patriotism and love of their country. The contribution of each was complementary to that of the others.

I have tried to give a picture of the forces which moulded Dr. Rajendra Prasad, his inner urges and aspirations, and the part that he has played in national development. For this purpose, I have given the background of the developments in the struggle for freedom in which he played an important part. As Minister for Food and Agriculture he was faced with a critical situation, which has been explained in the book. The problem of food supply still continues to baffle us. As President of the Republic of India Dr. Rajendra Prasad has been placed in the delicate position of functioning as a constitutional President, with the aid and advice of his ministers, without relinquishing his obligations to the people under the Constitution. This has been explained in detail as the constitutional position is still being crystallised. Whatever his role, the contribution that he has made to the progress of the nation emphasises the nobility of the ideas which inspired Gandhiji in his efforts to liberate the country.

I hope that my humble effort will lead to a better understanding of the personality of Dr. Rajendra Prasad, who embodies in himself the best traditions of our ancient culture and reminds us of the *rishis* (seers) enshrined in our history and legend.

I am deeply grateful to Dr. Rajendra Prasad for the interviews he granted to me and the confidence he has reposed in me. To numerous other friends, who know him intimately and helped me to understand him, I owe a deep debt of gratitude. I will not mention their names as many of them desire to remain anonymous.

Bombay,
10th March, 1960.

KEWAL L. PANJABI.

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PROLOGUE

THE fateful day had arrived. The prophecy made by Edmund Burke a hundred years earlier had been fulfilled. England's trusteeship must come to an end as soon as India comes of age. India had awakened from her dark slumber. The age of foreign domination was over and her dream of freedom, vital and active, was taking shape. Her toil and suffering had given her the right to forge the Constitution of India—the Charter of India's freedom. But the happy day was marred by an air of gloom when the Constituent Assembly first met in Delhi in December 1946. There were many absentees—kept away by the Muslim League. The 'direct action' launched by it had unleashed forces of violence, with rioting and carnage throughout the country. News came trickling in of mobs indulging in acts which outraged every decent instinct of humanity.

There was another hurdle to overcome. The statement of the British Cabinet Mission, providing the legal basis of the Constituent Assembly, was half-hearted and vague, and it would be necessary to guard against any encroachment on the independence of the Assembly. The times were critical and the Constituent Assembly had a tough job ahead of it. Nevertheless, the Assembly was determined to shape the Constitution that would guarantee not only the sovereign rights of the people but secure impartial treatment to all groups, castes and creeds. For its success, wise, firm and sympathetic guidance was necessary.

In this predicament the eyes of all were focussed on Dr. Rajendra Prasad. A quiet simple man, clad in homespun village clothes, austere in living and in thought, he had won the hearts of all by his unique sacrifices, his gentle approach, his deep scholarship and his devoted service to the country. His dignified bearing and cool temper, his habit of detachment and his capacity to make peace between conflicting interests had won him the love and trust of the people. Unanimously the representatives of all the communities and creeds conferred on him the highest honour by electing him President of the Constituent Assembly. This was a mark of the unstinted confidence which they reposed in him as the custodian of the

dignity and power of this august Assembly. To them he was the embodiment of the lofty spirit of India, the spirit that had animated our sages and *rishis*. He became the symbol of India's destiny.

Dr. Rajendra Prasad approached his task not with a feeling of triumph at the laurels presented to him by the nation, but in a spirit of humility and with a full realisation of the responsibility placed on his shoulders. He was overwhelmed by the trust reposed in him. However, he revealed his inner toughness by immediately declaring his firm determination to safeguard the integrity and independence of the Assembly. In spite of the limitations placed on it, he said:

‘The Assembly is a self-governing, self-determining independent body with the proceedings of which no outside authority can interfere and the decisions of which no one outside it can upset or alter or modify. It is in the power of this Assembly to get rid of and to demolish the limitations which have been attached at its birth.’ He expressed the hope that the Assembly would cast off the limitations and present to the world a model Constitution that would secure freedom to develop to the fullest potential for all peoples, all groups and all communities.

As President his contribution to the reconciliation of internal contradictions—a legacy of the British policy of divide-and-rule—was substantial. His judicious temper guaranteed equality to all, irrespective of caste, creed or politics. His deep erudition provided the right perspective for guiding the deliberations of the Assembly, and for holding the balance between the desire to have a strong Central Government and the urge to protect the freedom of the individual. His high sense of moral values and his gentle affable temperament endeared him to all sections of the Assembly. The Presidentship of the Assembly became a stepping-stone to the Presidentship of the Indian Republic to which he was elected first in 1952 and again in 1957.

WHO WAS THIS MAN FROM AN UNKNOWN VILLAGE, AN UNKNOWN FAMILY—WITHOUT MONEY OR INFLUENCE—WHO ROSE TO BE THE FIRST PRESIDENT OF INDIA?



[Courtesy: P.I.B., Delhi]

Dr. Rajendra Prasad being greeted by the farmers of his village Zeradai.

CHAPTER I

EARLY LIFE

IN a small house in Zeradei village in the State of Bihar Rajendra Prasad first saw the light of day on the 3rd of December, 1884—a year before the Indian National Congress was founded. It was a time when social, technical and economic changes had stirred India into activity. The impact of the West had led to the introduction of new scientific techniques and the improvement of communications. By linking up remote areas the railways had brought people closer and had quickened the flow of trade and commerce. There was some industrial development, notably of jute in Bengal and of textiles in Bombay and Ahmedabad, and this brought prosperity to a fringe of the people—the industrial and the trading classes. On the other hand, the British Government did everything to liquidate indigenous industries. The manufacture of Indian textiles and other products was suppressed by putting a ban on their exports and by levying crippling excise duties. The imports from Britain filled the vacuum. Millions and millions of Indian weavers and artisans were thrown out of employment. They flocked to the land, putting heavy pressure on it. Severe distress prevailed in the rural areas. Lord William Bentinck, the Governor-General, reported in 1834 that ‘the misery hardly finds a parallel in the history of commerce. The bones of the cotton weavers are bleaching the plains of India’.

Rural economy was disrupted by the introduction of the landlord system, particularly in Bengal, Bihar and other northern provinces. Those to whom land revenue had been farmed out were recognised as landlords—the original occupants being down-graded as their tenants. The landlords held the land as long as they paid the fixed revenue to the Government, and they were given full freedom to extract what they could from the tenants. Owing to the abuses of this system, some curbs were put in course of time on the authority of the landlords; and this system was not extended to other territories, such as Bombay and Madras, where the occupants of land were recognised as the owners.

A far-reaching change, which affected the power of the people

in the rural areas, was the break-up of the village *panchayats*. For centuries they had functioned as vital village republics and had kept the people together. During foreign invasions and political upheavals the villages had maintained their autonomy. Their *panchayats* had functioned as their spokesmen with the rulers in all matters, and even negotiated the amount of land revenue to be paid by the villages and the deductions to be made for the expenditure on the community needs of the people. All matters affecting welfare of the villages were their concern—including the settlement of disputes among the people. In them was incarnate the power of the people. Foreign observers, including British officers, had paid glowing tributes to the *panchayats*, which had maintained stability in the rural areas. But this curb on the power of the Government was not to the liking of the British, and they pursued a policy of weakening the hold of the *panchayats*. They were completely ignored in the new set-up, and village administration was entrusted to official headmen appointed by the Government and working under the control of the district officers. The corporate life of the villages was thus weakened.

Another change in the rural areas was the encouragement given to the growing of jute, cotton, indigo and other cash crops for purposes of export. This change in the cropping pattern stimulated the introduction of a money economy and brought about revolutionary changes in the rural areas. These were further accelerated by the introduction of the system of recording all ownership rights in land in the official village records. The security of title to land thus granted facilitated the legal transferability of such rights, and thus benefited the land-grabbing moneylenders in the rural areas. The combined impact of these changes was very severe.

The setting-up of printing presses had led to the introduction of newspapers and journals. The first newspaper was started by an Englishman in Calcutta in 1780, and the first Indian-owned and edited newspaper was issued in 1818. English education had caught the imagination of the leaders, and several schools were opened, leading to the establishment of universities at Calcutta, Bombay and Madras in 1857. This gradually led to a social upheaval. Educated young people—inspired by the teachings of Mill, Spencer and Huxley—grew res-

tive; and a spirit of revolt against the rigid social conventions imposed by orthodoxy in the name of religion and sacred custom gathered force. The political thought of Britain inspired ideas of freedom and liberty. As Rabindranath Tagore put it: 'The educated of those days had recourse to English language and literature. Their days and nights were eloquent with stately declamations of Burke, with Macaulay's long rolling sentences; discussions centred upon Shakespeare's drama and Byron's poetry and above all upon the large-hearted liberalism of the nineteenth-century English politics'.*

This awakening brought in its trail a spirit of revolt against the rigid practices and the social framework of Hindu society. Bengal took a lead in this. Bhagwan Chaitanya popularised freedom of worship unhampered by rituals and priests. Raja Ram Mohan Roy fought against the blind bigotry fostered by a sanctimonious priesthood. He founded the *Brahmo Samaj* in 1829 with a view to purifying Hindu religion. Ramakrishna Paramahansa had a great influence on the youth of the times and Swami Vivekananda established the Ramakrishna Mission for humanitarian and social work. Led by Rabindranath Tagore and others, there was a cultural and social renaissance in Bengal which found echoes in other parts of India. In Bombay G. K. Gokhale, Lokamanya Tilak, Mahadev Ranade and others took up educational and social work. Swami Dayanand's *Arya Samaj* found a congenial home in the Punjab and played a great part in the regeneration of Hinduism. The new classes of landlords, merchants, doctors and lawyers became the spearheads of social and political activities. They were destined to lead the national movement.

Bihar, which had been the home of Indian culture for centuries, had not been able to adjust itself to the changing conditions, and in the nineteenth century it was one of the most backward provinces. It had given birth to two founders of religion. Gautam Buddha had attained his enlightenment at Bodh Gaya. Mahavira, the founder of Jainism, had spent most of his time at Magadha. King Asoka had made Pataliputra (Patna) famous and Nalanda became a centre of learning. From the eleventh century Bihar came under Muslim conquerors. Sher Shah was the founder of modern Patna, which

* Rabindranath Tagore's Message on his 80th birthday.

had become the centre of Islamic culture. From the eighteenth century Bihar had attracted the British, the Dutch and the French on account of its resources of saltpetre, opium, calico, muslins and indigo. But its learning, culture and enterprise declined. The indigenous industries had been crushed, increasing the pressure of men on the land. Landlordism had been introduced on a large scale and the old village communities had collapsed. Grinding poverty stalked the land. The standard of living of the tenants was about the lowest in India. The bulk of the family holdings consisted of about four acres of land each—depending on uncertain rainfall. Administratively Bihar had been linked with Bengal and was much neglected. As Dr. Rajendra Prasad puts it, Bihar 'was a backward province socially and politically. Bengal had robbed it of its separate identity'.

Rajendra Prasad's ancestors had migrated from the eastern districts of Uttar Pradesh to Zeradei village in Saran district, which was backward in land fertility and yet one of the most densely populated areas in Bihar—where every square mile of cultivated area had to support 1304 persons. They brought with them nothing but education and a keen mind, and took up employment as teachers and later as estate managers. Rajendra Prasad's great-uncle Chaudhar Lal laid the fortunes of the family. He was endowed with the traditional virtues of his *Kayastha* caste—devotion to learning, loyalty to the master and skill in administration and management of the estate. He soon rose to be the *Dewan* (Chief Administrator) of Hathua Raj—a big landed estate. At one stage, when his young master's life was threatened by rival claimants, Chaudhar Lal used to sleep in the same room as his master and used to taste all food before it was served to his master. The tenants long remembered him for his humane and sympathetic treatment. By careful management and thrift he soon acquired a small landed estate of his own, which yielded an annual income of five to six thousand rupees.

Rajendra Prasad's father, Munshi Madvadev Sahai, grew up to be a country gentleman, a scholar of Persian and Sanskrit, fond of wrestling, who divided his time between horticulture and free *Ayurvedic* and *Unani* treatment of the patients who flocked to him. His mother was a devout lady and brought

him up to cherish the best ideals of ancient culture and traditions. She related to him stories from the *Ramayana* and sang devotional songs to lull him to sleep. These left a deep impression on him. Love of the country and devotion to *Dharma* took early roots in his mind. She had great influence in moulding his character, and he never failed to seek her advice and guidance, and invariably acted on it. Her death in 1910 deprived Rajendra Prasad of his guardian angel. To some extent her place had been taken by his elder sister, Bhagwati Devi, who was widowed at an early age. A tender affection had grown up between her and Rajendra Prasad. Possessed of a strong mind, she took charge of the household. Phuvaji, as she was called, had a commanding personality and was respected by all. Her recent death was a severe blow to Rajendra Prasad.

His brother, Mahendra Prasad, who was only eight years older, guided Rajendra Prasad's studies and moulded his thoughts. He realised the unusual potentialities of young Rajendra and encouraged him in every way. Relieving him of the care of family affairs, he left him free to pursue his career of social service and political struggle. Until he came under the magnetic spell of Gandhiji, Rajendra Prasad always consulted his brother and took his advice, for he knew that it came from a loving heart.

His family did not give Rajendra Prasad any influence in higher circles. Although it was well-to-do during Chaudhar Lal's life, it encountered hard times after his death. Owing to bad harvests and mismanagement of the estate the income was hardly sufficient for a decent living. Often it was a problem how to keep the two sons at college; on one occasion the family jewellery had to be pawned. But the family gave him more than money and influence. The home atmosphere was pervaded by a living faith in God and a spirit of devotion to *Dharma*. To these Rajendra Prasad has clung with tenacity throughout his life.

Zeradei and Jamapur, the adjacent village, really formed one unit. It was a medium-sized village which met most of the needs of the inhabitants. Being mainly agricultural, it had a sprinkling of artisans, weavers and traders to make it more or less self-sufficient. A religious toleration which enabled Hindus

and Muslims to live together permeated the village life. The two had developed common traditions, habits and ways of living and freely participated in each other's festivals. As a boy Rajendra Prasad looked forward to *Holi* and *Diwali* festivals when there would be music and dramatic performances with recitations from the *Ramayana*—which lingered in the memories of the simple people. Rajendra Prasad relates an example of the festive spirit of the people on these occasions. Group-singing used to be carried on throughout the night. 'In the group-singing it is the drummer who has a most strenuous job. Once a competing village group had only one drummer. He played for the whole night. He got blisters and they burst, but he continued. Blisters formed and burst, formed and burst again, but he saved the honour of the village. He received a hero's praise'.* Drinking wine was rare. Among the *Kayasthas* there was a belief that drinking was a sin that would be punished by leprosy. Life began at sunrise and ended at sunset with few luxuries to disturb the even content of their existence. Disputes among the people were settled by the village *panchayat* whose decisions were accepted by all.

There was no school in the village or nearby. So a Muslim divine was engaged to teach Rajendra and his two cousins Persian and Urdu. His remuneration was four rupees per month with free board and lodging. 'On the first day he began our education in the name of Allah, and an offering was made to him. Sweets were then distributed to all around.'† Simple arithmetic they learnt separately.

In a reminiscent mood he said: 'What a change has taken place now. In my days there was not even a primary school in my village or near it. A *moulvi* used to run a *maktab* (class) for teaching Urdu and Persian. He was fed by the parents of the pupils in turn and was paid two pice every Friday evening and a rupee or two per pupil at the end of the month. Hindi and elementary arithmetic was taught by a weaver who used to ply his loom while teaching. He taught the alphabet by covering a bit of plastered raised ground with coal dust, and the pupils had to practise writing the alphabet and the figures on this with their fingers or chalk. There were only three high

* *Autobiography* p. 12

† *Ibid.* p. 10

schools in the district for a population of one and a half million. Today there are a hundred high schools in the same district and one of them is in my village'.* Having completed his elementary education, it was desirable for him to go to a school where he could learn English—the language of the rulers. For this he had to go to the high school at Chapra twenty-three miles away. His studious nature and quick grasp earned him a double promotion in the very first year, and he soon topped the examinations. In 1902 he secured first rank in the matriculation examination of the Calcutta University, which catered in those days for all the provinces in the north-east from Assam and Bengal to Bihar and Burma.

While he was still a child of thirteen, Rajendra's parents fixed up his marriage with Rajbansi Devi, a daughter of a family of *mukhtars* (village attorneys). He was interviewed by the bride's father and uncle, was asked a few questions and was approved. His horoscope was scrutinised and found favourable. It indicated a powerful *Rajyoga*, and this would raise him to a position of great authority in Government. The early marriage was enjoined by ancient custom. Young Rajendra was hardly in a position to resist this move, particularly as he had been brought up in an atmosphere of filial obedience and conformity with traditions. On the appointed day he was carried to the bride's village in a palanquin in which he went to sleep. It was quite a job to wake up the boy-bridegroom to undergo the tedious ceremonies. Looking back on it, he has likened it to the game of dolls' marriage which he used to play with his sister. A year later the bride was brought to her husband's house. The marriage hardly affected him. The bride became the responsibility of the family, and Rajendra was left free to pursue his studies. For years they saw little of each other. The first child was born after ten years.

In his household the custom of seclusion of women prevailed. This practice arose in India after the Muslim conquest, when there was little security for women, and gathered force during the Moghul times. It was enforced particularly among the upper classes and in areas where the Muslim influence was prominent, namely the northern provinces from the Punjab to Bengal. In Rajendra Prasad's family it was rigidly enforced.

* To the Author

The young bride had to veil her face not only in the presence of males but even in that of her mother-in-law. It was considered bad form for anyone to visit his wife's room during the daytime, so much so that in later years, when his wife had an attack of cholera, young Rajendra was not permitted to see her. Nevertheless, in spite of this restriction, the women in the household exercised great influence over the men. They built up a position of dignity and affection which enabled them to share the life of their husbands, sons and brothers without being continuously in the way.

The hold of the purdah system began to loosen when the Congress brought women into the national struggle, particularly for picketing foreign cloth and liquor shops. Dr. Rajendra Prasad relates an incident showing the helplessness of women in these areas. One day a newly-married girl was posted by the volunteers in front of a shop. They forgot to collect her in the evening. She could not go to her house as she did not know the address, nor was she able to recognise her house from outside. Custom forbade her to mention her husband's name. She could only write it. She knew little beyond the four corners of her house. And yet she had enlisted as a volunteer in the national struggle! With the help of a gentleman who had come to pick up his wife from the same shop, she ultimately reached her home.

Preoccupation with his studies, his legal practice and political work kept Rajendra Prasad away from home, and he saw little of family life. He was a lonely man, immersed in his work. His elder brother had the care of his wife and children. Looking back on it, he says: 'We met only during the holidays. Although it is forty-five years since we were married, I wonder if we have lived together for as many months. Even when I was practising as a lawyer in Calcutta, I had to live by myself. When I settled down in Patna my people lived with me for a short time. And when the non-cooperation movement began, I could hardly keep my wife with me in Patna or go and see her in my village. There was so much to do that my preoccupation left me little time for my personal matters'.*

And yet he is fond of children and loves nothing so much as playing with his fifteen grandchildren. The joint family has

* *Autobiography* p. 23



The granddaughters greeting Dr. Rajendra Prasad on his birthday.

continued, and he treats his brother's children as his own. His heart is like that of a child and with them he sheds his shyness and reserve and mixes freely as one of them. They enjoy his company and look forward to the time that he spends with them.

Rajbansi Devi, or Mataji as she is now called, is simple and dignified in manners and dress. The hubbub of active politics did not appeal to her, and she did not join her husband in his political activities. She kept herself in the background and left her husband free to pursue his political and social activities. However, she trained herself under Gandhiji and spent long periods in the Sabarmati Ashram. A strict regime prevailed there. There were no servants and she had to do everything herself. But she was happy and became conscious of the part that women can play in building up a nation. During the non-cooperation days she took an active part and was jailed, but she was released because she went on a fast.

CHAPTER II

CALCUTTA

HAVING secured first place in the matriculation examination, Rajendra Prasad decided to pursue his studies at the Presidency College at Calcutta. Coming from a small town, he was thrilled by the massive buildings, wide roads and rumbling tram-cars. Young Rajendra, clad in a Bihari *achakan*, pyjamas and cap, was at first taken for a Muslim. Everything he saw was a new experience to him. But he constantly remembered the advice of his good friend and school teacher Rasik Lal Roy who, on the eve of his departure to Calcutta, fêted him with mangoes and sweets and warned him against sloth and negligence: 'Nothing should seduce you from your hard work in maintaining your position as the first student in the class. Calcutta is a very big city. It is full of places of entertainment and distraction, many of which are undesirable. You should keep away from them'.*

He did so, but could not keep away from malaria which haunted him. He had suffered from it at Chapra, but the attacks now came with greater frequency and virulence. He chafed at this interruption in his studies and sought relief in drastic remedies—large doses of quinine. These kept the malarial attacks at bay, but the quinine left its trail behind. As he says: 'Heaven knows how much quinine I consumed. Twenty-five years later, a homeopathic doctor told me that my asthma was the result of so much quinine'.† This affliction pursued him for many years. Strain of work and sometimes changes in the climate brought violent attacks of asthma. It is amazing how he carried on with his ailing body, in fact defied it, at the call of public duty. Fortunately, he has now brought it under control, and his health is normal—able to stand the strain of a strenuous day's work.

The Presidency College at that time had several distinguished professors. He learnt much from P. K. Roy's teaching of philosophy. For Mr. Percival he had great admiration. 'Mr. Percival was a great scholar. His simplicity, devotion

* *Autobiography* p. 29

† *Ibid.* p. 32

to duty, unassuming manners and strictness could not but make a great impression on us all'.* Binayendra Nath Sen also made a keen impression on him. He learnt chemistry under Dr. P. C. Roy and physics under Dr. J. C. Bose, who conceived such regard for him that he later entrusted large sums of money to him for prohibition work in the mining areas. Rajendra Prasad was greatly attracted to science but could not master mathematics. So he gave up his intention to take his degree in Science and pursued the Arts course. Presiding over the centenary celebrations of this college in 1955 he said: 'Whatever service it has been my good fortune to give to our people and the country has been the result of what I learnt and assimilated from all those with whom I came into contact'.†

At the university he had a brilliant career, coming first in every examination for the Bachelor's Degree and winning several scholarships. They were necessary for supplementing the slender remittances from home. The family fortunes had declined on account of bad seasons and mismanagement of the estate, and often money had to be borrowed to keep him and his brother at college.

Books did not occupy all his time, and he mixed freely with everybody and became a social figure. His simple straightforward nature and his unassuming manners won him the deep regard of the students who, to the amazement of the staff, elected him the Secretary of the College Union, in preference to a senior student.

Behind his gentle nature there was a hard core of determination. In defiance of the caste ban he joined a dinner party in honour of Dr. Ganesha Parshad on return from overseas. It was customary to undergo purificatory processes on return from a foreign country. Dr. Parshad had declined to do so and, therefore, eating with him was banned by the caste people. Rajendra Prasad was threatened with removal from the caste for eating with Dr. Parshad unless he agreed to undergo the purificatory and penitential ceremonies. But young Rajendra firmly declined to do so. He was supported by the progressive elements in his caste, and the agitation gradually fizzled out.

'Calcutta opened my eyes to the world,' he said. It drew

* *Autobiography* p. 41

† *Speeches* 1952 p. 206

him into the vortex of public activities. A new consciousness had been aroused in Bengal by a galaxy of giants, such as Raja Ram Mohan Roy, Swami Vivekananda and Rabindranath Tagore. Social and economic life was in a ferment. The social reforms sponsored by Ram Mohan Roy, Keshub Chander Sen and others broke the power of Hindu orthodoxy, which had for long oppressed men and women and kept them ignorant and backward. Swami Vivekananda preached the gospel of strength and action. 'If there is a sin in the world it is weakness, avoid all weakness, weakness is sin, weakness is death,' he said; 'and here is the test of truth—anything that makes you weak physically, intellectually and spiritually, reject as poison; there is no life in it; it cannot be true. Truth is strengthening, truth is purity, truth is knowledge.' Rabindranath Tagore revived the ancient tradition of Indian culture and gave expression to it in constructive educational work. On the political front a storm had arisen over the partition of Bengal in 1905—carried through in the teeth of opposition from the people. The moderate politicians, like Surendranath Bannerji and Bipin Chandra Pal, organised a country-wide resistance to it by the force of their oratory and the spirit of fearlessness. The cult of violence also attracted many votaries. It found expression in the *Yugantar* edited by B. Dutt and in the *Bande Matram* of Aurobindo Ghose. Between 1906 and 1910 Shri Aurobindo was prosecuted on three occasions and in 1908 spent a year in jail. In 1910 he slipped away to Pondicherry and spent the rest of his life as a Yogi with a great reputation and following.

In search of a weapon to fight the British the country took to *swadeshi*, that is boycotting all articles of foreign manufacture. In Bengal the movement spread like wildfire. Mahendra Prasad during his college vacation had spoken about it to Rajendra who was then still at school. His reaction was immediate and he took to it whole-heartedly. He determined not to use foreign articles. Later, when some college students at Calcutta twitted him for using a foreign fountain pen, he showed them all his clothes and belongings and they were surprised by his exclusive devotion to *swadeshi*.

Rajendra Prasad pondered deeply over these events, both social and political. His gentle nature could find no response

to the extremist views preaching the cult of violence in the struggle for freedom. What particularly repelled him was the resort to armed robberies in order to get funds for carrying on the struggle. He was slowly drawn to the constructive field of work. Satish Chander Mukherjee, a contemporary of Swami Vivekananda, had renounced his practice at the Bar and devoted himself to work among the students. Assisted by N. N. Ghose, Sister Nivedita and others, he started the Dawn Society which aimed at widening the horizon of the students and building up their character. Rajendra Prasad was an ardent member of the Society, which held regular classes and lectures. It had a great influence on his outlook and instilled into him a habit of social service. He started organising the Bihari students, who were scattered all about Calcutta, and bringing them together in the Bihari Club. In 1906 he founded the Bihari Students Conference which had its first session in Patna. Through it the students learned to organise themselves and exchange their views on public affairs. It also provided a forum for training in the art of public speaking.

Having taken his degree of Bachelor of Arts in 1906, Rajendra Prasad began thinking of a career. Government service did not appeal to him. But the glamour of the Indian Civil Service attracted him. At that time entry into the Service could be gained only by appearing in a competitive examination in London. He says: 'I began to be obsessed by a new idea; to go to England somehow and pass the I.C.S. examination'.* His brother supported the idea; several friends offered to help with funds. As his trip to England was not likely to be approved by his family, he made secret preparations to leave, hoping that after his departure from India his family would get reconciled to the idea. But somehow the information reached the family, and he got a telegram to come home as his father was seriously ill. When he got there 'everyone started crying and father scolded my brother for conspiring to send me abroad'. He then appealed to Rajendra not to hasten his end by going abroad. Rajendra Prasad could never do anything against the wishes of the family. It was no use trying to persuade them to let him go. They could never bear the idea of separation from him. His father was ailing. How

* *Autobiography* p. 52

could he build his happiness on the grief of others? Causing pain to those he loved so dearly was alien to his gentle nature, and he dropped the plan.

After taking his M.A. in 1908, Rajendra Prasad took up the post of a professor in Muzzafarpur College. But the profession did not appeal to him and the college did not offer bright prospects. His brother advised him to pursue legal studies. He decided to do so, although the study of law had no particular attraction for him, and he was drawn to it purely by family considerations. The income from the family estate was dwindling, and the legal profession offered the best prospect of rehabilitating the family finances.

When he was steadily building up a legal career in 1910, he was called upon to make a momentous decision which would have changed the tenor of his life. Gopal Krishna Gokhale was searching for talent for the membership of his Servants of India Society. He met Rajendra Prasad at Calcutta and appealed to him to join the Society. 'The country needs men like you. Come and join the Servants of India Society,' he said. This suggestion disturbed him greatly and for ten days he turned it over in his mind—losing his appetite and sleep. He felt personally that he could adapt himself to the bare living conditions of the Servants of India. But the family had pinned great faith on him. The household affairs were in confusion, the family income had dwindled. Should he desert the family? he asked himself. Ultimately he wrote to his brother, although he was sharing the room with him, asking for his approval of his joining the Society. He explained that he had no ambition except to be of service to the country. Wealth had no attraction and poverty no terrors for him. But he hesitated because he would be of no use to the family thereafter. His brother, realising the thirst in his soul, burst into tears. Both wept together and decided to consult their mother, who was deeply moved and said nothing. But the practical-minded sister, Bhagwati Devi, spoke out: 'By talking of going abroad you made father miserable. Now by talking of becoming a recluse at this age you want to make your brother unhappy'. She then burst into tears and all in the house started crying. Unable to inflict suffering on those nearest to him, Rajendra Prasad gave up the idea.

He returned to Calcutta to continue his legal studies and was apprenticed to Khan Bahadur Shamsul Huda, a lawyer of fame and political standing as leader of the Muslims. Struck by his diligence and conscientiousness, the Khan Bahadur took a keen interest in his training. Rajendra Prasad had to work very hard, as, in addition to his studies and court work, he had to give private tuition in order to maintain himself. This kept him busy from early morning till late at night, but Rajendra Prasad has never flinched from hard work. He went through his training so assiduously that the Khan Bahadur used to pay him many compliments.

In 1911 he started legal practice under handicaps which would have deterred many young men. He had no connections among rich clients, senior lawyers or influential persons and relied more on poor clients. His integrity, hard work and sound knowledge of law drew more and more clients to him, and he rapidly rose in the profession and earned the good opinion of the judges and senior counsel. Sir Ashutosh Mukherji, Judge of the High Court, was so impressed with his masterly presentation of law that, as Vice-Chancellor of the University, he offered him the post of Professor of Law. It was a great compliment to Rajendra Prasad, who had only two years' experience of law, and he readily accepted the post. Dr. Rash Behari Ghosh, a leading but temperamental lawyer, was so struck with him that he told him: 'You will go very far'. The judges placed great reliance on his arguments because they felt that they were based on a deep study of law and conscientious presentation of the case. His transparent honesty would not permit him any of the dubious ways of lawyers. He would never mislead his clients with the prospects of success. He says: 'I never accepted a case which could not be argued properly. I preferred to tell such a client that there was nothing to be gained by filing a suit'.*

In 1915 he got the degree of Master of Laws in the first division, and a Doctorate of Laws now awaited him after two years. In 1912 Bihar had been separated from Bengal, but a separate High Court was not established at Patna till 1916, when Rajendra Prasad shifted his practice to Patna. The fifteen years that he spent in Calcutta were a formative period

in his life. Calcutta had turned him from a callow schoolboy to a finished young man, an expert in law and a rising advocate, fired with the spirit of public service.

In Bihar he ranked among the leading advocates and had a flourishing and lucrative practice. But most of his income he spent on others. He started taking greater interest in political activity and was drawn to the Indian National Congress.

CHAPTER III

THE INDIAN NATIONAL CONGRESS

IN 1906 Rajendra Prasad, who had just graduated, worked as a volunteer at the session of the Indian National Congress at Calcutta. During the twenty-one years of its existence the Congress had become the premier political organisation in the country. Allan Octavian Hume, a retired member of the Indian Civil Service, had first conceived the idea and had intended that the Congress should deal with social reforms. But the Viceroy, Lord Dufferin, had persuaded him to make it a political organisation so that it could be a forum of organised public opinion. When it first met in 1885 most of the people invited had to be persuaded and cajoled to attend it. Seventy-two delegates, mostly drawn from the professional and the trading classes, attended it. Discussion on social questions was barred for fear that it might lead to controversies breaking up the solidarity of the Congress! The speeches were all made in English and abounded in professions of loyalty to the Queen-Empress. The Congress continued to be a tame body submitting petitions to the benign British Government in respectful language for the grant of some crumbs of power or privilege.

When Gandhiji first attended the session of the Congress in 1901, he was given only five minutes to move his resolution on the South African-Indian question. He was struck with the perfunctory proceedings and the waste and confusion all round. Two years later Hume in his farewell message urged the Congress to be more effective by taking determined action. Bal Gangadhar Tilak—who represented the robust realism and indomitable spirit of Maharashtra—had linked himself with Aurobindo Ghose, who had the revolutionary ardour and tempestuous energy of Bengal. They were not satisfied with the Congress serving merely as a platform for voicing India's aspirations. They wanted it to take up agitation, both in England and in India, so persistent as to allow no alternative to the British but to give their rights to the people. But the moderates like Sir Pherozshah Mehta, Gopal Krishna Gokhale and Surendranath Bannerji were firmly established in the

Congress and would permit no change. In 1904 Sir Henry Cotton as President struck a strong note and urged that autonomy was the keynote of India's destiny and pressed for the establishment of a 'federation of free and separate States cemented together under the aegis of Britain'. But the efforts of the extremist section to get the Congress to accept country-wide boycott of foreign goods could not succeed, because the moderates were not inclined to take any action that would bring on them the wrath of the British Government.

At the Calcutta session in 1906 the extremists gained some ground. Dadabhai Naoroji, as President, pressed the claim of *Swaraj* and said that India would get it only by convincing Britain 'that Indians would not rest till they have achieved their political rights'. The adoption of *Swadeshi* and boycott of foreign goods found more favour with the members.

At this session Rajendra Prasad heard the speeches of Sarojini Naidu, Pandit Malaviya and M. A. Jinnah and was drawn to the Congress, but he did not join it till he had completed his legal studies. The moderates, who were reluctant to incur the displeasure of the Government, now manoeuvred to keep the extremists under control at the next session in Surat. But in this they were not successful. Disorderly scenes by the extremists compelled the President to adjourn the session. Tilak was blamed for breaking up the session. He wanted to make the boycott and *Swadeshi* resolutions more forceful. Endowed with a dynamic personality, he had stirred Maharashtra with his trenchant writings in the 'Kesari'. Simple and austere in living, he worked fearlessly and had already served a sentence of eighteen months for seditious writings. He had no patience with the policy of 'petition, protest and prayer' favoured by the moderates. He realised that the necessary pressure could be put on the Government only by organising the masses to support the demands. He had galvanised Maharashtra by reviving on a mass social scale the festival in honour of Ganesh, God of Wisdom and of Victory. The Shivaji celebration, introduced by him, had awakened a feeling of pride in the glory of the past and gave promise of the future. But he was not responsible for the disorderly scenes. Aurobindo Ghose has written: 'Very few people know that it was I who gave the order that led to the breaking of the Con-

gress'. At this stage Aurobindo was a revolutionary who believed in armed revolt for liberating the country. Between 1908 and 1910 he was prosecuted thrice and spent most of his time in jail.

Next year Tilak was prosecuted for his outspoken comments on the Maniktoola Conspiracy case and sentenced to eight years' imprisonment. Lala Lajpat Rai, popularly known as the Lion of the Punjab for his bold attacks on the repressive policy of Government, was deported. The moderates now remained in control of the Congress and pursued their cautious go-slow policy.

On completion of his studies Rajendra Prasad joined the Congress in 1911 and was elected a Member of the All-India Congress Committee. There was a lull in political activity. The undoing of the partition of Bengal brought calm after storm. Tilak, who had endeavoured to give the Congress an aggressive outlook, was still in jail and the field was free for the moderates. The Congress session at Bankipore in 1912 struck Jawaharlal Nehru as having more the appearance of a social gathering than a political assembly. Its tone was carefully loyalist and many of the delegates were dressed in morning coats and immaculate trousers. The English-speaking upper middle classes dominated the Congress.

This quiescent atmosphere continued till 1914 when the World War stirred India. There was very little genuine sympathy for the Allies. The princes and political hangers-on found this a good opportunity to profess their loyalty and to assist the Government with money and recruits. But the people were not impressed and remained sullen and aloof. There was nothing in the war aims of the Allies to inspire them. On the other hand, the Muslims felt their loyalty divided between the *Khalif* who was the head of Islam on one side and the British Government on the other.

After the débâcle of Mesopotamia a greater burden of war effort fell on India. Pressure was intensified for mobilising men and resources. 'Voluntary' contributions from the public were collected by Government officers more by compulsion than by 'gentle persuasion'. Recruitment to the army and the labour corps by force and fraud was resorted to in the 'martial areas' until the figure went up to a million. This

created a hostile public opinion which was becoming vocal and insistent. The internal economy was subjected to a great strain. The abnormal army demand for cereals, ghee, oils and other articles of consumption created a scarcity of supplies, aggravated by bad crops. The prices of foodstuffs and other necessities kept rising higher and higher, leading to resentment and acute discontent among the people. In the interest of the war effort it became necessary to suppress free expression of news and opinions. Censorship of news was imposed and the Defence of India Act was passed authorising summary arrest and imprisonment of troublesome persons.

In this smouldering atmosphere the moderates kept losing ground in the country. Tilak resumed public life in the middle of 1914 after serving his sentence of imprisonment. He was as defiant as ever though more cautious in his public utterances. In his commentary on the *Gita*, written in prison, he preached courageous action with no desire for the fruit thereof. The book had a tremendous effect in vitalising political and social life. Gopal Krishna Gokhale's death in February, 1915, left the field to Tilak and his gospel of determined action.

The Muslim discontent and distrust of the war aims of the Allies increased on account of their veiled sympathy for the *Khalif* and their general suffering due to economic conditions. The grant of separate electorates to them in 1905 had tended to keep them away from Hindus, thus fulfilling the imperialist policy of the British Government—to divide and rule. But now common suffering and common distrust of the rulers brought them into closer contact. In 1915 the Congress and the Muslim League both held their annual sessions in Bombay. It was hoped that this would enable them to come together to put joint pressure on the Government. The plan worked and after protracted negotiations a settlement was reached between them for joint action. At the next session of the Congress an agreement known as the Lucknow Pact was reached. Tilak played a very important role in this. The Congress agreed to the continuation of separate electorates for Muslims, and the Muslim League gave up its demand for Muslim votes in the general constituencies. The League and the Congress joined together to press for constitutional reforms, giving the people a larger share in the government of the country. They urged

that India should be made 'an equal partner in the Empire with self-governing dominions' and that the central and provincial legislatures should have majorities of elected members. It was at this session that Rajendra Prasad first met Gandhiji who had brought with him a great reputation for his unique achievement in South Africa. Leading a crowd of 2,500 Indian indentured labourers from Natal, Gandhiji had demanded the repeal of the annual tax on the labourers. The non-violent resistance offered by the labourers was successful, and this was a great triumph for Gandhiji and his method of *satyagraha*.

Gandhiji, however, did not make any immediate impact on the Congress, which continued to be dominated by Tilak. At this session some delegates from Bihar approached Gandhiji to take up the cause of the indigo farmers of Champaran. They related the atrocities committed by the European planters on the tenants, which Gandhiji found difficult to believe. He agreed to go and see things for himself. In April, 1917 he went there and won for the *kisans* the elementary rights which had been denied to them by the planters. In the process he evolved the technique of *satyagraha* which became a powerful weapon in the national struggle. This struggle also marked a turning point in the life of Rajendra Prasad.

CHAPTER IV

CHAMPARAN

INDIGO was a curse put on the cultivators of north Bihar. It had been a valuable commodity for export right from the seventeenth century when the East India Company first handled it. Two centuries later it had become the most important item of export next only to tea. There was good money in it, for India had a virtual monopoly of it. The Europeans wanted to get control over the trade. They had established a number of factories all over the areas and demanded regular supplies from the cultivators and wanted to pay as little for them as possible. They tightened their hold on the indigo lands by acquiring some, leasing others and by compelling the farmers to grow indigo. The farmers resented this, as indigo cultivation involved hard manual work, and the return depended entirely on the goodwill of the planters. The farmers had told the Indigo Commission in 1860:

But if my throat is cut, I won't sow indigo;
I would rather go to a country where indigo
plant is never seen or sown;
I would sow indigo for nobody, not even for
my father and mother;
No, I would rather be killed with bullets.

But the factories had to be fed regularly. Instead of giving incentives to the farmers and making it worth while for them to cultivate indigo, the planters relied on compulsion and force—and it was brutal force—in defiance of the law of the land. The planters got away with it because they were well-organised and had direct access even to the Governor, the Viceroy and the Secretary of State. The British district officers, on account of racial ties, common interests and pressure from above, were partial to the planters and connived at their misdeeds. However, there were some who were independent. Mr. E. De Latour, Magistrate of Faridpur, in his evidence before an enquiry committee in 1848 stated:

‘ I have seen several ryots (sent unto me as a magistrate) who had been speared through the body. I have had ryots before me who have been shot down by Mr. Forde, a planter. I

have put on record how others have been first speared and then kidnapped; and such a system of carrying on indigo, I consider a system of bloodshed.'

Sir Ashley Eden in his evidence before the Indigo Commission of 1860 said:

'There certainly was a failure of justice which, in my opinion, may, to a great extent, be attributed to the strong bias which the Governor and many of the officers of the Government have always displayed in favour of those engaged in this particular cultivation; this may also partly have arisen from the difficulty, which exists under the present law, of obtaining a conviction against Europeans. I consider that it has frequently been the case that the Government officials have sacrificed justice to favour the planters. I will go further and say that, as a young assistant, I confess I have favoured my own countrymen in several instances.'

If a high official championed the cause of the cultivator, he was removed from office. Even Sir George Grant, the Lieutenant-Governor of Bengal, was not spared. He had expressed an opinion unfavourable to the planters. Against a combined onslaught of the planters he broke down and retired in 1862; soon afterwards he was prosecuted by the planters for libel. Nominal damages of one rupee were awarded to the complainants.

In north Bihar the planters were firmly established. Champaran district is in the north-west corner of Bihar at the foot of the Himalayas. Most of the villages in this district were owned by the Bettiah Raj. Taking advantage of the heavy indebtedness of the Maharaja the planters obtained for him a loan of ninety-five *lakhs* of rupees in England, and in return he had to give a perpetual lease of 2000 square miles at a fixed rental of five and a half *lakhs* of rupees to be paid to the creditors in England. In addition to these *mokarri* villages the planters went on taking temporary leases from the Bettiah Raj with the result that they acquired the rights over lands in nearly half of Champaran district. As they were the sole buyers of indigo they were in a dominating position. In Champaran about 96,000 acres were under indigo crops.

Indigo cultivation was carried on either in *zairat* land owned by the factories and cultivated with hired labour, or in *assami-war* land leased by the planters to the tenants. In these lands

the planters introduced the hated system, called *tinkathia*, of reserving 3/20ths of the land for indigo cultivation, and usually the best land of the tenant was taken for this purpose. Under the tyranny of the planters, supported by the officials, the tenants were reduced to a state of slavery, growing indigo under compulsion. They were entirely at the mercy of the ruthless planters.

In 1910 the price of indigo fell by nearly 40 per cent on account of the manufacture of artificial dyes in Germany. The planters now turned their attention to making up the loss somehow and forced the cultivators in the *mokarri* villages to sign agreements for an increase in rent up to 60 per cent. In the other areas held on temporary lease the planters levied compensation for waiving the clause regarding growing of indigo. They even recovered higher rents on one plea or another without giving any receipts for them. The farmers sent petitions to the Government against the compulsory enhancement but nothing happened. The planters were well-placed with Government.

In 1914 there was a renewed demand for indigo as the supplies of synthetic dyes from Germany were not available. Compulsory cultivation of indigo was now enforced with a vengeance. The *tinkathia* system had no legal force behind it and yet the planters enforced it by tyrannical acts of hooliganism and harassment. The tenants who would not agree to it had their houses looted and crops destroyed and were even beaten up. Any resistance by the tenants was punished with the help of the police and the magistrates.

When the Maharaja of Bettiah died, the Maharani was declared insane and the Estate was taken over by the Government for management. One of the planters was appointed manager of the Estate and the planters exploited the tenants without scruple.

The planters also took advantage of the provision in the agreement that higher rent could be levied for land newly settled. They got the tenants to sign agreements for lands which really did not exist, and these were nevertheless binding on the tenants. This move was supported by the appointment of a Government Officer who was specially appointed to register the new leases. The tenants' cup of suffering was filled

to the brim and in no way could they get any relief either from the Government or from the law courts.

Rajkumar Shukla, one of the cultivators of indigo, tried to enlist the support of the national leaders. He attended the Lucknow Congress as a delegate from Bihar and approached Lokamanya Tilak and Madan Mohan Malaviya to take up the cause of the indigo farmers; but they were too busy with the political struggle. He then met Gandhiji, who was dressed like a Kathiawadi peasant and was not wearing shoes, as a sign of mourning for Gokhale's death. Gandhiji replied that he could give no opinion without seeing the conditions with his own eyes and promised to go to Bihar for this purpose. The Congress at its Lucknow session in 1916 passed a resolution requesting Government to appoint a Committee of officials and non-officials 'to enquire into the cause of agrarian trouble and the strained relations between the indigo ryots and European planters in north Bihar and to suggest remedies thereof'. Shukla pressed Gandhiji to visit Bihar and ultimately brought him from Calcutta to Patna on the 7th of April, 1917.

Rajendra Prasad was unaware of this approach to Gandhiji; and when Gandhiji arrived at Patna he was taken to the house of Rajendra Prasad who was out of town. The servants had a quick look at Gandhiji and took him for one of the master's rustic clients and put him up in an outhouse. The next day Gandhiji contacted Mazhrul Haq whom he had met in London while they were studying for the Bar. He had renewed his acquaintance with him in Bombay at the 1915 session of the Congress when Mazhrul Haq had invited him to be his guest at Patna. Mazhrul Haq immediately came to meet Gandhiji and offered him his hospitality, but Gandhiji only wanted guidance as to where he should go. Haq advised him to go to Muzzafarpur where he would be able to discuss the matter with the Commissioner and the Planters' Association. He wired to J. B. Kripalani, who was a professor there, to arrange for his accommodation. Gandhiji left the same day for Muzzafarpur and was met by Kripalani and stayed with Professor N. R. Malkani. Rajendra Prasad and Brajkishore Babu arrived the next day.

Gandhiji met the Commissioner, who advised him to leave immediately as he was not wanted and threatened that if he

did not do so he might be arrested. Gandhiji told him that he had no intention of leaving, and he was prepared for the consequences. He also met the representatives of the planters who told him that he was an outsider and had no business to come between the planters and their tenants. On the 15th of April he left for Motihari to organise the work of the enquiry. The local pleaders offered to help Gandhiji in his enquiry and gave him every assistance. On the 16th of April, while he was on his way to a village, he was served with a notice from the District Magistrate, under Section 144 of the Criminal Procedure Code, asking him to leave the district as his presence might lead to serious disturbances which might be accompanied by loss of life. Gandhiji replied that he was not there for agitation but his desire was purely and simply to ascertain the true position. The work of recording statements of the cultivators who flocked to his camp in very large numbers continued under the guidance of Rajendra Prasad and others. On the 18th of April he received a summons to show cause why action should not be taken against him. He attended the Court and judgment was reserved for the 21st of April. Mazhrul Haq, Brajkishore Babu, Rajendra Prasad, Polak, Anugrah Sinha and Shambhusaran arrived at Motihari and agreed to follow Gandhiji to jail if necessary. Gandhiji had also sent a letter to the Viceroy on the 18th of April protesting that he was being prevented from doing public service, and as he no longer had the trust of Government he was making arrangements to return the Kaiser-i-Hind medal awarded to him. On the 20th of April the Government withdrew the case and Gandhiji was at liberty to continue his enquiry. These proceedings created a stir in the rural areas, where Gandhiji assumed the role of the highest tribunal to whom even complaints against the District Magistrate could be made. On the 9th of May he met the Revenue Minister at Patna, who tried to persuade him to discard the assistance of the local pleaders on the ground that they were not doing this work in a spirit of public service but only in order to get publicity for themselves. Gandhiji declined to do so. Two days later he felt that he had enough material to submit his report to Government. The statements of 4,000 farmers had been recorded. At the invitation of the Governor he met him on the 4th of June at Ranchi

and discussed the matter with him for two days. The Governor wanted to appoint a Committee to enquire into all the grievances and offered Gandhiji a seat on it. He pointed out that as a member of the Committee he would have access to the official records relating to all the grievances of the tenants and the opinions of the officers. Gandhiji agreed to be on the Committee on condition that he would be free to confer with his co-workers during the progress of the enquiry, and if he was not satisfied with the result of the enquiry, he would advise the farmers on the action to be taken. On the 10th of June the Committee was appointed. Meanwhile, the workers under the guidance of Rajendra Prasad and Brajkishore Babu had completed recording the grievances of 8,000 tenants from 850 villages. Gandhiji returned to Patna on the 28th of June, and the Committee started its work and completed the examination of the witnesses on the 16th of August. Gandhiji then left for Ahmedabad, leaving Rajendra Prasad in charge of the organisation. On the 22nd of September he returned to Ranchi to write the report, which was signed on the 3rd of October, 1917.

Gandhiji made up his mind that no useful purpose would be served by the Committee expressing an opinion on the past misdeeds alleged against the planters. He felt that the sufferings borne by the tenants could not be undone in this manner and therefore it was useless to rake up the past. He wanted to concentrate on the particular grievance which related to compulsory cultivation of indigo on a portion of the land, the compulsory increase which was called *sharabeshi* and illegal payment of compensation which was known as *abwabs*. The other members of the Committee agreed to this as it saved them from embarrassment. Gandhiji wanted also to achieve unanimity in the Committee. Consequently, he agreed to some compromise dictated by practical considerations. The Committee submitted a unanimous report declaring that the system of reservation of land for indigo was illegal and should be abolished, that the planters should collect only three-fourths of the increased rent and that they were to return one-fourth which had been recovered in excess from the cultivators. The Committee also held that the *abwabs* were illegal and that the tenants were entitled to get receipts for all payments made by

them. The recommendations of the Committee were accepted by the Government and enforced from the 1st of May, 1918. The people were not entirely satisfied with the compromise. Equity demanded that the increase in rent should be refunded. But Gandhiji had agreed with the other members of the Committee because he felt that it would be impracticable to get redress through the law courts, in which he had little trust. By agreeing to the compromise he felt that the power of the planters would be broken and the authority of the rule of law would be established. It happened as he anticipated. The planters lost their grip. The end of the war also reduced the demand for indigo and the industry died a natural death.

The farmers' victory in Champaran had far-reaching effects throughout the province. Bihar was a backward province socially and politically. It had too long been tied to the apron-strings of Bengal. In 1911 it was created a separate province with Orissa, but public life was at a low ebb. The enthusiasm generated by the successful outcome of this agrarian struggle stirred new life throughout the province. The farmers became bold and conscious of their rights. The public workers were given a new technique. The old practice of holding conferences and passing resolutions, of petitions and protests, became outmoded. The workers must take up the cause in good earnest and dedicate themselves to securing justice for helpless people. But for this purpose it was necessary to ascertain the facts on the spot by personal investigation, in an impartial and objective manner. This practice would also bring the public closer together. Rajendra Prasad learnt a great deal by moving about the villages, recording statements of facts by questioning the tenants over and over again in order to sift the truth. He says: 'By recording the statements of the villagers and thus coming into close contact with them we acquired an intimate knowledge of their problems and hopes. While this work enabled the villagers to shed their fear complex, we too became fearless'.*

Secondly, Gandhiji insisted that this work must be done without ill-will or bitterness against their adversaries. The fight was against the system, not against the individuals. Gandhiji mixed freely with the planters and accepted their

* *Autobiography* p. 93

invitations to visit them. He enlisted their co-operation in opening new schools. His attitude towards the Government was also constructive. He told the Commissioner that his object was not to interfere with the authority of the Government but invoke its help in redressing the grievances of the cultivators.

Thirdly, the public workers must be prepared to suffer cheerfully any consequences of their activities. They should shed their fear of the authorities, and, if necessity arose, they should be prepared to defend their freedom of action even at the risk of imprisonment.

When Rajendra Prasad proceeded to the spot to assist Gandhiji, he had no idea of courting imprisonment. But when he and his co-workers found that an outsider was prepared to champion the cause of the Bihari farmers at the risk of going to jail, Rajendra Prasad pondered over the matter. What would happen to his family if he was sent to jail? He would be immobilised for a period. Yet Gandhiji was prepared to go to jail. Would he not be abandoning a man who had suddenly appeared from nowhere to help the Champaran people? Was it not his duty to follow the same course? This appealed to his nature, and he informed Gandhiji that he would be prepared to follow him to jail. Other workers reached the same decision. Gandhiji's response was characteristic. 'Now victory is ours,' he said. Public work, instead of being an occupation of leisure, became an act of dedication.

Continuous living with Gandhiji for about a year had a great effect on the mode of living of the public workers. Rajendra Prasad was orthodox and would not eat any food unless it was cooked by a *Brahmin*. This created complications and restricted free contact with the villagers. It also struck at the team spirit among the workers. Gandhiji advised them that public workers should give up their caste prejudices. Rajendra Prasad agreed and disregarded the taboo. Contact with the farmers also had a great effect on the public workers. 'Our living became simpler. We washed our own clothes, carried water from the well, washed our utensils and helped the cook. Any short journey to nearby villages we did on foot. We travelled by third class in trains. We gave up ease and comfort without demur.'*

* *Autobiography* p. 98

During his campaign Gandhiji had been struck with the poverty and backwardness of the people. He felt that although the grievances of the indigo farmers had been redressed his work was not over. In November, 1917, he returned to Champaran with a team of volunteers to do constructive work. His wife and his son Devadas, Mrs. Avantikabai Gokhale, Mrs. Anandibai Vaihampayan, Mahadev Desai and Narhari Parikh with their wives and others came with him. He got Dr. Deva from the Servants of India Society also.

The low standard of living in the villages was appalling. A labourer's wage did not exceed 10 *pice* a day for a man, 6 *pice* for a woman and 3 *pice* for a child. A revealing incident is furnished by Gandhiji: 'I happened to visit a small village and found some of the women dressed very dirtily. I told my wife to ask them why they did not wash their clothes. She spoke to them. One of them took her into the hut and said: "Look, there is no box or cupboard containing other clothes. The saree I am wearing is the only one I have. How am I to wash it? Tell Mahatmajji to get me another saree, then I shall promise to wash and wear clean clothes every day".'*

Gandhiji felt that the root cause of the backwardness of the people was lack of education. He decided to make a beginning by opening schools in six villages with the help of volunteers. He made the villages responsible for providing board and lodging for the teachers. Each school was placed under a man and a woman who had also to look after medical relief and sanitation. Simple treatment was provided and in complicated cases Dr. Deva was consulted. These centres hummed with activity. At Barharwa 140 boys were taught by Mr. B. D. Gokhale and about forty girls and women by his wife. Lessons in weaving and in corporate action such as cleaning of wells and roads were given. However, his hope of putting the constructive work on a sound foundation was not fulfilled. He had to go to Ahmedabad in February, 1918, to deal with the labour disputes in the textile industry and also with the agitation of Kaira farmers against an increase in land revenue.

Gandhiji summed up his work in Champaran as under: 'Those who would know my method of organising *Kisans* may profitably study the movement in Champaran when *satyagraha*

* *Gandhi in Champaran*, by D. G. Tendulkar, p. 110

was tried for the first time in India with the result all India knows. It became a mass movement which remained wholly non-violent from start to finish. It affected over twenty *lakhs* of *Kisans*. The struggle centred round one specific grievance which was a century old. There had been several violent revolts to get rid of the grievance. They were suppressed. The non-violent remedy succeeded in full in six months. The *Kisans* of Champaran became politically conscious without any direct effort'.*

The Champaran struggle was the first direct object lesson in Civil Disobedience. A new weapon in political warfare had been tried and found successful. Rajendra Prasad was so enamoured of it that he wanted to see at first hand how it would fare in Kaira where Gandhiji proceeded to organise the peasants against the payment of land revenue demanded by Government. The assessment had been based on incorrect data, and the peasants, led by Gandhiji, convinced the Government of the iniquity of the demand. The technique of non-violent resistance was again successful. During this campaign the personal devotion of Rajendra Prasad to Gandhiji increased, and on one occasion he tried to spread his *chaddar* (cotton shawl) for Gandhiji to rest his hot and tired feet while walking over a sandy stretch in the hot April sun. But Gandhiji wanted to share the sufferings of the peasants walking with bare feet over these grounds, and would not accept this little comfort.

After the Kaira agitation Gandhiji wanted to assist the war effort of the Government because despite its mistake 'he had faith in Britain and was confident that she would do justice in the end'. So he pleaded that the country should contribute in men and money. So great was the spell cast by Gandhiji that Rajendra Prasad, a pacifist by nature and conviction, joined an official board for recruitment of men to the army in Bihar.

* *Gandhi in Champaran*, by D. G. Tendulkar. p. 115

CHAPTER V

1918

As the World War neared its end, Dr. Rajendra Prasad felt that political activity had gathered much momentum in the prevailing atmosphere of economic discontent due to scarcity of essential supplies, which had been diverted for war purposes. The price spiral of food grains, oils, cloth and other household articles was mounting. The forced recruitment in the 'martial' areas had denuded the countryside of much productive labour. The people had expected that they would get relief after the end of the war, particularly as a reward for their war effort. But the economic conditions actually worsened. The hopes of the people had been aroused by the announcement of Mr. Montagu in 1917, when he assumed office as Secretary of State for India, that Britain would introduce a series of constitutional reforms. Political consciousness had been organised by the founding of the Home Rule League by Bal Gangadhar Tilak in April, 1916, with the famous slogan '*Swaraaj* is my birthright'. He had stirred the country with his clarion call and wielded great influence in the Congress. Dr. Annie Besant had also founded the All-India Home Rule League at Madras in September, 1916, and proclaimed that 'the price of India's loyalty is India's freedom'. President Woodrow Wilson's fourteen points, including the grant of Self-determination to occupied areas, had raised hopes that India also would get a fair deal. The soldiers who returned from the war areas brought with them a heightened consciousness of their political rights, which permeated the rural areas.

In this atmosphere the proposals of the British Government to grant an instalment of Self-Government, known as the Montagu-Chelmsford Reforms, were published in July, 1918. Briefly, they provided for elected majorities in the Central and Provincial Legislatures, but retained the official blocs nominated by Government. The Viceroy was also authorised to exercise the overriding power of veto in respect of any legislation. In the provinces the system of 'dyarchy' was introduced, by which certain subjects were reserved under the control of the Governor,

and other subjects such as Education, Health and Local Self-Government were entrusted to the Ministers selected from the majority parties in the Legislatures. The public reception of these proposals was a mixed one. The general feeling was that the reforms were halting and stunted. Dr. Rajendra Prasad's reaction to these proposals was that the Government proposals fell short of our expectations; 'but we were not in a position to put greater pressure on the Government'. He also doubted whether 'we had come up to the level where we can carry on the administration if it were transferred to us too early'.* He therefore pressed that the scheme should be given a fair trial. By temperament he is a realist and does not easily brush aside the difficulties in the way as problems which would solve themselves. He felt that we should take what was given and then ask for more. This was exactly the line taken by the Congress at the special session. It considered these proposals 'disappointing and unsatisfactory', but decided to accept the reforms subject to certain reservations.

By a curious quirk of destiny these reform proposals coincided with the publication of the report of a Committee presided over by Sir Sydney Rowlatt. The Committee had been asked to consider what measures were necessary in view of the fact that the validity of the Defence of India Act would expire six months after the termination of the war. Unless some provision was made, it would be obligatory on the Government to release all internees detained without proper trial. It was considered that in view of the 'revolutionary activities in the country', the Government should have sufficient powers to maintain law and order. The report of the Committee made a strong case for retention of the emergency powers exercised by the Government during war time. The provincial governments should be given powers of internment without trial, and juries should be dispensed with in case of trials for political offences. The Government accepted this report, and in February, 1919, published the text of the Rowlatt Bills implementing these recommendations.

The publication of these Bills aroused consternation and alarm in the country, as they constituted a serious threat to the freedom of the people. To the people they were 'Black Bills'

* *Autobiography* p. 102

and 'lawless laws'. Gandhiji appealed to the Viceroy not to proceed with them. But his appeal fell on deaf ears. In sorrow and chagrin he called for a countrywide protest against the Bills in the form of a *hartal* or day of mourning on the 30th of March—later changed to the 6th of April. On that day he called upon the people to observe a fast, in order to strengthen them in their determination, and to hold public prayers and protest meetings. The response to his appeal from all parts of India was amazing, and unprecedented scenes occurred. At Delhi there was such a wave of emotion that Swami Shradhanand, a staunch leader of the Hindus, led a procession of Hindus and Muslims and offered his body as a target for the bullets of the military. He was hoisted shoulder high to the ancient and hallowed mosque, Jumma Masjid, and asked to preach to the congregation there. Similarly, Muslim divines were invited to preach in Hindu temples. Protest meetings were held throughout the country. The Government lost its nerve and banned all meetings and processions. The ban only strengthened the determination of the people and added to their enthusiasm. The army was called in to the aid of the police. At several places firing was resorted to, resulting in heavy casualties. Rajendra Prasad took an active part in organising the *hartal* in Patna and did it so effectively that it ended without any disturbance of the peace. As stipulated by Gandhiji, he took the pledge of non-violence and agreed to defy such laws as were proscribed by the *Satyagraha* Committee.

Disturbances, however, broke out all over India. In the Punjab the authorities became panicky, martial law was declared and a reign of terror was let loose, culminating in a massacre in Jallianwalla Bagh, Amritsar. A large crowd had gathered in the public park, enclosed by high walls, to protest against the Black Bills. The military, under the command of General Dyer, arrived on the scene and ordered the crowd to disperse. At the same time it blocked the narrow exit. No way was left for escape, and the unarmed crowd was fired on until the ammunition was exhausted. The casualties were 379 killed and 1200 wounded. Public floggings were resorted to, and in order 'to teach the natives a lesson', General Dyer ordered all Indians passing through a particular lane to crawl on all fours as a public punishment for an assault on an English lady.

This had a catastrophic effect on the relations between the rulers and the ruled. It revealed the British Government as relying mainly on the naked sword. By the sword they had conquered India and by the sword they were determined to retain their hold over it, argued their military representatives. The people felt that, despite the suave utterances of the Government having a veneer of democracy, the British relied on sheer force to maintain their hold, and were prepared to go to callous and inhuman limits to suppress the peaceful fight for freedom.

A wave of alarm and indignation swept over the country. It stiffened the resistance of the people, who realised the true nature of the struggle that would have to be waged. People flocked in larger numbers to the Congress. Those who were wavering made up their minds to throw in their lot with the Congress, despite the stringent requirements of non-violence and the prospect of spending several years in jail.

The discontent among the Muslims over the *Khilafat* also brought them closer to the Hindus. Turkey had been dismembered and the *Khalifa* had been reduced to a nonentity. Many Hindus joined the *Khilafat* committees and Muslims joined the Congress in larger numbers. There was a feeling that a united front was the only answer to the challenge of British might.

The effect of these events on Rajendra Prasad was cumulative. They aroused deep indignation in him and strengthened his determination to fight for the freedom of the country. It was not in his nature to remain a spectator when the liberties of the people were being crushed under the military heel and the Central and State Governments were being armed with arbitrary powers. He felt that he must play an active part in this. To his gentle nature the *Satyagraha* Movement made a profound appeal. A crisis came when at a public meeting in Patna in April, 1920, Shaukat Ali asked the people how far they were prepared to follow the non-cooperation programme. Dr. Rajendra Prasad was taken unawares and asked to speak. He got up and declared his readiness to join the movement as soon as it was launched. He had previously thought over it, but had not come to any conclusion. Actually, he had planned to enter the State Legislature and was nursing the Champaran

constituency for that purpose. He would have to abandon that idea. Moreover, this would mean giving up his practice at the Bar, which brought him the necessary funds to keep the family going and to help many other needy persons. By his joining the *Satyagraha* Movement the family would be left in the lurch and would have to depend entirely on the meagre income of his elder brother. But on the spur of the moment, in his own words, 'the die was cast'. He had no time to consult his brother. The compulsion of his nature goaded him to throw in his lot with those who had pledged themselves to serve the country and suffer for it.

In August he had to preside over the Bihar Political Conference. He wondered whether he should commit the Conference to support the non-cooperation movement. Several staunch leaders were still cautious and not yet reconciled to this extreme step. If he exerted pressure the Conference would be divided. But he took the plunge, guided by his inner voice. The Conference accepted his lead and voted for non-cooperation.

Lokmanya Tilak had dominated the session at Amritsar, but Gandhiji now took up the challenge offered by Tilak's ideology. They had much in common. Both of them were simple in their personal habits and imbued with a burning love of the people. Both were lawyers by training and very effective speakers. They belonged to the masses, but differed in their approach to politics. To Gandhiji's charge that Tilak considered everything fair in politics, Tilak replied: 'Politics is a game of worldly people and not of *sadhus*; and instead of the maxim: "One should conquer anger by opposing it with tranquillity and non-anger", as preached by the Buddha, I prefer to rely on the maxim of Shri Krishna: "My response to the devotees is in perfect harmony with the manner of their approach". Both methods are equally honest and righteous, but the latter is more suited to the world than the other'.* This was an amplification of his oft-repeated words, 'tit for tat'. Tilak did not believe in the efficacy of *satyagraha* as a political weapon against the rulers, and felt that even a *hartal* might lead to bloodshed. But he told Gandhiji in July 1920: 'I will do nothing to hinder the progress of the movement. I wish

* 'Young India', 28th January, 1920

you every success, and if you gain the popular ear, you will find in me an enthusiastic supporter'. Soon after, Tilak fell ill and passed away on the 1st of August. His last words were: 'The long day's task is done and I must sleep'.

His death left the political field free for Gandhiji. The enthusiasm of the people had reached a high pitch and Gandhiji, with an uncanny sense of timing, now called upon the Congress to adopt his non-cooperation programme. A special session, summoned in September, 1920, approved of it. Rajendra Prasad had now to consider seriously giving up his practice at the Bar. He decided not to accept any more briefs. What worried him were the cases on his hands for which he had received fees and those which he had partly conducted. Morally, he was committed to them, and he decided that he must stick to them. But he kept turning the matter over in his mind, and sought release from his commitments by returning the fees in some cases and by entrusting others to his friendly colleagues. Only one case he retained and this was because of special circumstances. The case was a complicated one which he had handled for a long time, and he felt that he could not desert his client.

The other matter which demanded his urgent attention was the boycott of schools and colleges managed or aided by the Government. In order to make the boycott effective, it was proposed to start national schools and colleges, imparting education through the medium of the regional languages. English would be taught merely as a second language. Rajendra Prasad was convinced of the limitations of using English as a medium of instruction. The development of students to their full potential was seriously handicapped by using a foreign medium. But, true to his nature, he could not close his eyes to the difficulties of the change-over. He warned his colleagues and pleaded with them that in a country of chronic unemployment, school and college education became the means of earning one's livelihood. Most of the employers preferred a man with a good knowledge of English. The system of national education, employing the regional language as the medium of instruction, would affect the competitive qualifications of young men for securing good employment. He felt, therefore, that there should first be a boycott of schools before

other steps were taken. He also urged that the position should be explained clearly to the students, who should not be kept in the dark regarding the curtailment in their prospects of employment. They should be clearly apprised of the thorny path before them and should be prepared to face privation and suffering. The enthusiasm of the workers would, however, accept no half measures. A National College was started at Patna and Rajendra Prasad was pressed to join it as Principal. He bowed to the decision and changed his life from that of a flourishing lawyer to that of the Head of a newly-started college. He put all his energy into this work and soon two hundred primary national schools in Bihar were organised and fifty secondary schools were linked with the National College. Gandhiji pressed for establishing a National University and helped in collecting funds for it. Moulana Mazhrul Haq took up this work with earnestness and sincerity. He made over his bungalow and grounds on the outskirts of Patna to the university. *Sadaqat Manzil* was renamed *Sadaqat Ashram*. The National College was also shifted there. It became the home of Rajendra Prasad for the next 25 years. The building was surrounded by a mango grove in which the students were housed in palm-leaf huts. As Dr. Rajendra Prasad put it, 'from a desolate place the area was converted into a garden sprinkled with huts and pulsating with activity'.

The session of the Congress at Nagpur in December, 1920, was a great landmark. The moderates who opposed the non-cooperation programme—including Mr. Jinnah—parted company with the Congress. Gandhiji's leadership was unchallenged. The goal of the Congress was now fixed as *Swaraj*. A new method of political action was evolved, and the Congress was reconstituted to secure for it the broad basis of a mass organisation. It was decided to enrol more members. Representation for each area was fixed on the basis of population. The old practice of obtaining a delegate's ticket by paying Rs. 100 as membership fee, as in Bihar, was abolished and a system of regular election by the Congress Committees was instituted. These measures were intended to vitalise the Congress and make it a true mass organisation. Intensive propaganda was undertaken to explain the aims and objects of the Congress. Dr. Rajendra Prasad says: 'Public meetings

were the order of the day in Bihar. There was not one little corner of the province where the Congress message did not penetrate. The Congress workers were active every day explaining the Congress programme. The whole province was agog. I toured the entire length and breadth of Bihar in 1920 and for the first time I saw the whole province and made innumerable contacts'.* The workers took up in earnest the enrolment of new members and collection of money for the *Swaraj* Fund. They toured incessantly every nook and corner of the country. Rajendra Prasad devoted his time to this work. On one occasion he had to spend a night in a broken-down car 'listening to the roar of a tiger and expecting it to appear at any moment'.

In order to make the programme of reaching the masses effective, Rajendra Prasad took up editing a new Hindi weekly called 'Desh'. It built up a good circulation. He also worked on the editorial board of 'Searchlight', an English bi-weekly. Thus his time was divided between the college, the journal and mobilising the villages for the movement.

The new look of the Congress, its determination to shift politics from the drawing-rooms of the educated and the business men to the huts in the countryside and to the tillers of the soil, could not fail to attract the attention of the authorities. The Congress promised *swaraj* within a year if the people would follow its programme. A new spirit of boldness and confidence inspired the people. The Government felt that this was a potential threat to its administration, especially in the inflammable atmosphere of popular discontent due to scarcity of supplies and high prices of necessities. It felt that unless the movement was suppressed it might become unmanageable. A countrywide campaign of repression was started by the Government. During a few months 30,000 Congress workers were sent to prison. In Bihar Rajendra Prasad organised the people for a temperance campaign. This hit the revenues of the Government. In Champaran many Congress workers were called upon to furnish security for good behaviour or in default to suffer imprisonment. Processions and meetings were banned and many persons were sent to prison. The people were anxious to join issue with the

Government, but Gandhiji felt that the preparatory work had not yet been completed.

In April, 1921, Lord Reading had succeeded Lord Chelmsford as Viceroy. He had come with a big reputation for his success as Ambassador to the U.S.A. and as Lord Chief Justice of Britain. As a successful diplomat and an outstanding advocate and judge, it was hoped that he would uphold the best traditions of British justice. But beyond soft words the people got nothing from him. Although he was gifted with a keen intellect, he did not grasp the situation and was clearly out of his depth. He floundered and did not realise the extent of the upsurge of the people. Slow to take independent decisions, he gave way to the pressure of his officials, who were haunted by fear of the unknown. To them repression appeared to be the only remedy. In September, 1921, Moulana Mohamed Ali and Moulana Shaukat Ali were arrested for making seditious speeches. They had supported a *fatwa* (religious mandate) issued by the Muslim divines in India, calling upon all Muslims in the name of religion not to cooperate with the Government. The Congress took up the challenge, and the *fatwa* was repeated by Hindus as well as Muslims at meetings held throughout the country. The Government could not tackle resistance on such a large scale.

In order to bolster up the prestige of the British, a visit by the Prince of Wales in December, 1921, was planned. It was thought that he would serve as a rallying point to the loyalist elements and this would check the tide of sedition that was gaining ground. Gandhiji appealed to the Viceroy to postpone the visit and not to embarrass the people, who had nothing personal against the Prince of Wales. The times were such that the people could show their resentment against the Government only by boycotting his visit. This warning was unheeded. When the Prince of Wales landed in Bombay on the 17th of December, 1921, a complete boycott was announced. This was successful, but a clash occurred between the loyalists, who wanted to welcome the Prince, and the public who treated them as traitors. Violence broke out. Fifteen lives were lost and 300 persons were injured. Gandhiji was shocked, and he proceeded to Bombay and undertook a fast which had a sobering influence on the people. It was decided to organise

the *Sevak Dals*, a volunteer force pledged to non-violence, to control the crowds and public meetings. The Government retaliated by declaring the *Sevak Dals* unlawful organisations and making countrywide arrests of leaders. Rajendra Prasad enrolled in a *Sevak Dal* and called upon others to do so. Many Congress leaders in Patna were arrested but Rajendra Prasad, who was expecting arrest, was not touched.

A week later the Congress at its session in Ahmedabad decided to launch *satyagraha*. Gandhiji was appointed dictator in charge of the movement and given powers to nominate his successor if he was arrested.

On the 4th of February Gandhiji launched *satyagraha* and issued his directive for mass civil disobedience. The response was good throughout the country, but it took a shocking turn in the remote village of Chauri Chaura, U.P. The police firing on an unarmed crowd had so infuriated the people that they retaliated by burning down the police station with some policemen inside it. About twenty-two policemen lost their lives in these disturbances. This incident had a profound effect on Gandhiji, who summarily called off the non-cooperation campaign on the ground that the people were not yet ready for it. He felt that it would be dangerous to proceed with the work of *satyagraha*, as the people had not yet understood the importance of non-violence. Gandhiji's decision had a mixed reception among the Congressmen. Rajendra Prasad was shocked to learn of it at Bardoli, where he had gone to attend a meeting of the Working Committee. He felt that a sporadic act of violence should not be the ground for calling off the campaign, because the enthusiasm of the people had been roused, the ground had been prepared, and a set-back at this stage would be disastrous. Gandhiji asked Rajendra Prasad what his reactions were, and detecting a dubious look on his face, Gandhiji explained his point of view to him. Rajendra Prasad says: 'I revolved the problem in my mind in the light of what Gandhiji had said and I felt that his attitude was correct. I told him so the next day'.* When Gandhiji faced the All-India Congress Committee on the 24th of April at Delhi, it was a disgruntled assembly; but he converted it by telling the members that if the campaign had not been suspended, it would

* *Autobiography* p. 163

have been essentially a violent struggle and not a non-violent one. The country would gain by this halt in order to get on the right path and not to lose sight of its objective.

With almost a prophetic vision Gandhiji immediately turned to chalk out a plan of constructive work to be taken up. He felt that he might be deprived of his freedom at any moment, and before that happened he wanted to lay down a programme for strengthening the Congress movement. The programme laid down that the membership of the Congress should be increased to at least ten million. This should not be done indiscriminately, but all members must be screened to ensure that they accepted the Congress programme. Spinning of yarn and making of *khadi* should be popularised and developed, national schools should be opened everywhere; the depressed classes should be organised for the improvement of their social, mental and moral conditions. Temperance campaigns by house-to-house appeal should be undertaken, and picketing of foreign cloth and liquor shops should be organised. Unity of all classes should be promoted and further contributions collected for the *Swaraj* Fund. The All-India Congress Committee approved of these proposals but demanded that civil disobedience should be revived.

Immediately after, Gandhiji was arrested on the 10th of March and tried for sedition at Ahmedabad. He pleaded guilty to the charge, and claimed that his way of non-cooperation was a way out of the unnatural state of the relations between India and England, and added: 'In my opinion, non-cooperation with evil is as much a duty as cooperation with good.' He was sentenced to six years' imprisonment. Dr. Rajendra Prasad was in Ahmedabad throughout the trial and when the sentence was delivered his emotion was so great that he burst into tears. It was with great difficulty that he could control himself. He felt that the sentence was a harsh one and would deprive him of the company of one who had become his guide, philosopher and friend.

CHAPTER VI

1922

AFTER the trial, Rajendra Prasad returned, dejected and depressed, to his room in the *Sadaqat Ashram* at Patna. He wondered whether he would be arrested; the Congress leaders all over the country were being put behind bars. He was prepared for it. What use was it to enjoy freedom when Gandhiji was in jail? Meantime, he must do as Gandhiji had instructed him just before going to prison: 'Keep up the constructive work and you will be preparing the people for *satyagraha*'. He got the Bihar Congress Committee to act quickly and adopt the constructive programme. It endorsed the decisions of the All-India Congress Committee at Bardoli and Delhi sessions, and pressed the District Congress Committees to work actively for promotion of *khadi* and national education. The national schools which were languishing had to be financed and properly staffed. They could only appeal to the pupils and the parents if they had competent teachers.

To many Congress workers, who were aggressive in their outlook and wanted quick results, the constructive work made little appeal. They felt that it was a slow process and demanded a spirit of patience and sacrifice, which did not suit their temperament. The leaders from Maharashtra and other provinces were in favour of the Congress programme being reconsidered. Doubts and hesitations had gathered force within the Congress ranks. Some thought that Gandhiji had lost a golden opportunity by not accepting the compromise offered by the Viceroy at the time of the visit of the Prince of Wales at Calcutta. C. R. Das and others were of this view. Others felt that Gandhiji was imposing impossible conditions with regard to non-violence. Pandit Motilal Nehru asked: Why should a town at the foot of the Himalayas be penalised if a village at Cape Comorin failed to observe non-violence? Others thought that non-violence was raised to the status of an end in itself, and this savoured of idolatry. Because of these differences of opinion, internal squabbles and a spirit of despondency prevailed among the Congress workers. The revival of Hindu-Muslim tension added to their troubles.

The *Khilafat* movement, which had brought the Hindus and the Muslims together on a religious issue, collapsed in November 1922 when the Turkish nation, headed by Mustafa Kemal Pasha, sent the puppet Sultan into exile. Automatically, he ceased to be the *Khalif*. The hostility of the religious Muslims to British rule was now softened; and this gave an opportunity to the British to play upon the old distrust and differences between the Hindu and Muslim communities. Communal disturbances, which were to haunt the country for more than thirty years, reappeared on the stage—beginning with a riot at Multan. Rajendra Prasad went to the spot with Hakim Ajmal Khan and Pandit Madan Mohan Malaviya. They met Mr. Emmersen, the district magistrate. 'We did not find him keen on restoring communal harmony. He only said that everything would be done to take legal action against the rioters.'* In this case the alleged provocation was a stone thrown at a *tazia* during the *Moharrum* procession. It was assumed that the culprit was a Hindu, and that the insult to their religion could only be vindicated by killing Hindus and looting or destroying their property. The pattern of the communal riots was more or less the same. The alleged killing of a cow, or playing of music before a mosque, would set off a spark for a conflagration in which the communities would resort to mutual killing, looting and arson until the Government stepped in and restored order. Riots in Amritsar followed those in Multan, and the killing in Kohat followed that in Amritsar. There was a feeling of helplessness among the people.

In January, 1924, Rajendra Prasad rushed to Poona to meet Gandhiji, immediately after an operation for appendicitis had been performed on him. When he visited him in the hospital, Gandhiji told him that he might be released on grounds of ill-health, but that would not please him. He hoped that the strength of the people would grow and assert itself. On the 5th of February Gandhiji was released, and in April he resumed the editorship of 'Young India'. The communal riots caused him much pain. He deplored the fact that non-violence which had received much lip-acceptance had not actually guided the conduct even of those who had taken its pledge. He wrote: 'We have been intolerant towards

* *Autobiography* p. 181

our opponents. Our own countrymen are filled with distrust of us. They simply do not believe in our non-violence. Hindus and Muslims in many places have provided an object lesson, not in non-violence but in violence'.*

Communalism now held the stage. It was fed by the patronage in the hands of the Government. Rivalry and competition between the communities for posts of ministers, other high offices and official favours were encouraged by the Government. Communalism thus became a struggle for obtaining jobs and posts of vantage, and it was exploited by a class of politicians who used religious dogmas for their own purposes. In September, 1924, Gandhiji went on a twenty-one-days' fast. It focussed attention on this development in our national life, but failed to stem the tide. The two communities tried to strengthen their own organisations. The Hindu Mahasabha held its first session in 1923 at Gaya. Rajendra Prasad was nominated the Chairman of the Reception Committee, and he persuaded Madan Mohan Malaviya to be the President. Rajendra Prasad was drawn into this in good faith. At that time there was no Congress ban on the organisation of communal bodies, and he did not visualise the future development of the Hindu Mahasabha and its promotion of *Sangathan* and *Shuddhi* (conversion) movements.

A mood of despondency and doubt had caused serious differences within the Congress Party. The seeds of this were first sown when Gandhiji called off civil disobedience on account of the Chauri Chaura disturbances. Unlike Rajendra Prasad, many were not convinced that this was a wise move and felt that it had given a serious set-back to the enthusiasm of the people. What had actually happened after the withdrawal of *satyagraha*? The Government had arrested the leaders and set about the repression of all those connected with the Congress. The result was the scattering of the Congress workers, some of whom were lured into good posts offered by the Government. What had Gandhiji asked them to do? Only constructive work. But it did not appeal to many workers, who found it slow and taxing. It did not suit those with a dynamic outlook—who wanted to do something that would keep alive the struggle with the Government. These workers now argued

* 'Young India', 3rd April, 1924

that the Congress should contest the elections, enter the legislatures and continue the fight for *swaraj* on the floor of the House. Deshbandu Das, as President of the Gaya Session of the Congress in 1922, strongly advocated this programme, but failed to win the support of the majority at the session. He resigned the Presidentship and organised the *Swaraj* Party. The Congress was now sharply divided between those who favoured council entry, called pro-changers, and those who opposed it, called no-changers. The pro-changers argued that the country was not fully prepared for a programme of civil disobedience as it did not fulfil the minimum requirements laid down by Gandhiji. At the same time something must be done to keep the struggle before the people. An important opportunity of continuing it in the legislative councils was afforded by the elections to be held, and this opportunity should not be thrown away. The Congress *Swaraj* Party was likely to secure many seats. Its voice might not be fully effective in securing a change of policy, as the Viceroy's veto still remained. Nevertheless, an organised party in the legislature would act as a check and serve to moderate the action of the Government. The no-changers, on the other hand, argued that the entry into the council would be futile and would only divert the attention of the workers from constructive work—which alone could be the foundation of an effective national organisation. This was the view held by Rajagopalachari, Jawaharlal Nehru, Vallabhbhai Patel, Rajendra Prasad and others. Rajendra Prasad's faith in the no-change policy was so great that Deshbandu Das remarked that Rajendra Prasad was the only excuse for the continuation of Gandhism. Discussions between the two wings in the Congress continued, and ultimately a special session of the Congress, held on the eve of the elections, permitted the *Swaraj* Party to enter the Councils. The regular session of the Congress at Cocanada in 1923 confirmed this. At the elections the *Swaraj* Party, under Motilal Nehru and C. R. Das, got forty-five seats in the Central Legislature. In conjunction with other nationalist groups it was able to muster a working majority on several occasions.

On his release from jail Gandhiji, who had been strongly opposed to council entry, surveyed the developments in the political field. Realist that he was, he felt that if the Congress

revived the ban on council entry, it would mean the break-up of the Congress. There were two groups in the Congress—almost equally divided. He decided that it was of primary importance to maintain unity within the Congress and suggested that each group in the Congress should carry out its own programme. Consequently, at the Belgaum Congress session in 1924, at which Gandhiji presided, it was decided that in political matters the *Swaraj* Party would have a major voice, while in a constructive programme the no-changers would lead the way with the *Swarajists* helping as much as they could.

The contribution of the *Swaraj* Party to the struggle for freedom was mainly in focussing attention in the legislature on the demand for *swaraj*. Through skilful manoeuvring, the party was even able to get some majority decisions, compelling the Viceroy to resort to his extraordinary power of veto. It voiced the opinion of the people and this had a double effect. It served to curb the Government, which could not carry on by using the Viceroy's extraordinary powers on all occasions. To the people in the country it was some satisfaction that the national point of view was being forcefully expressed in the legislature. This helped to keep up their morale. Towards the end of 1925 the *Swaraj* Party pushed through a resolution in the Central Legislature calling upon the Government to take immediate steps to frame a Constitution granting *swaraj* to India. As there was no response by the Government, the *Swaraj* Party, early in 1926, withdrew from the legislature. Actually, it was the last session before the fresh elections.

Throughout the controversy relating to council entry Rajendra Prasad continued to hold strong opinions against it. His heart was in constructive work, and he felt that the pressing problem of hunger, poverty and ignorance could only be solved through constructive work and not through the legislatures, which did not reflect the will of the people. With Rajagopalachari he toured the country, appealing to the Congress workers to concentrate on constructive work, on the propagation of *khadi* and promotion of national education. He appealed for funds but got only sixteen *lakhs* against a target of twenty-five *lakhs*. In Bihar he carried on the work against heavy odds. He had to contend with repressive action by the Government

against the Congress workers. In Assam the Congress propaganda against the consumption of opium, which had been undermining the health and morality of the people, brought down the wrath of the Government. Leading Congressmen were put behind bars, the workers were harassed and threatened, and even some of the Congress offices were burnt down. The people were scared, dejected and despondent. Rajendra Prasad went there with Pandit Malaviya. They divided the work between them. Panditji visited the towns and Rajendra Prasad went to the rural areas, met the Congress workers, saw the damage done to the Congress buildings and cheered up the workers. He travelled to distant spots, wherever repression had taken a heavy toll, even through tiger-infested forests, in order to keep the message of the Congress fresh in the minds of the people. In his own province also, repression was let loose in the Santhal Parghanas to the extent that the people were afraid to come and meet the visiting Congress workers. He went there and interviewed the Congress workers in jail. While he was sleeping on the railway platform his shoes disappeared, and he had to walk in the hot sun with blistered feet. He steadily carried on the constructive work of national education, propagation of *khadi*, removal of untouchability and promotion of Hindu-Muslim unity.

There was a brief interlude of municipal work in 1924. Active work in the local bodies was not banned by the Congress. It was felt that the Congress workers should also try their hand in municipal administration. Vallabhbhai Patel had become the President of Ahmedabad Municipality and Jawaharlal Nehru of Allahabad Municipality. Rajendra Prasad was pushed into the office of the President of Patna Municipality. He approached the task with enthusiasm and applied himself conscientiously to improving the conditions of the town. But he came up against the basic problem of finances. There was so much to be done. The drainage was in a primitive condition. Open drains discharged dirty water into cesspools, which owing to seepage had polluted the water supply in the wells. Clean drinking water was available only from the river. The roads were in a shocking condition. Milk was brought into the city and distributed under primitive conditions. The municipal sweepers were badly housed and always in debt to money-

lenders. The improvements demanded a good deal of expenditure. But the municipality had limited powers to raise the necessary funds. The members of the municipality were not in favour of additional taxation. The sanction of the Provincial Government was necessary for levying additional taxation and for raising loans. In spite of his best efforts, Rajendra Prasad could not get the necessary cooperation from the Government. He felt that in the prevailing atmosphere very little improvement could be made. He says: 'Finding ourselves in a hopeless position we tendered our resignation after a year's experiment'.* Jawaharlal Nehru had the same experience at Allahabad and resigned after two years' experiment. Vallabhbhai Patel alone achieved outstanding success in Ahmedabad Municipality. This was due to his consummate skill in organisation and the response he got from the public and the Government.

* *Autobiography* p. 211

CHAPTER VII

1926

POLITICAL activity, which had received a mortal blow from the Chauri Chaura disturbances, continued to languish for six years. Internal differences, patched up by compromises, remained within the Congress. Even the Swarajists now began to split among themselves. The policy of creating deadlocks in the legislatures did not appeal to a large section within the party. Led by M. R. Jayakar and others, they pleaded for a policy of responsive cooperation with the Government, to the point of accepting office in the Government, in place of the negative policy of only creating deadlocks in the legislatures. Curiously enough, even Rajendra Prasad favoured this course. A staunch opponent of council entry, he felt that 'if we entered legislatures at all, we should do whatever we could under the constitution. I had never been able to understand the policy of deadlocks. But, of course, I considered council entry useless, because the rights which the 1920 Constitution gave us were entirely inadequate'.* The *Swaraj* Party was depleted by the secession of those who advocated responsive cooperation. A further loss occurred on account of the differences between Motilal Nehru and Lajpat Rai supported by Madan Mohan Malaviya, who had orthodox Hindu leanings. As the result of these differences, the *Swaraj* Party got less support in the 1926 elections, and the Nationalist Party led by Lajpat Rai took the lead in the Central Legislature.

In spite of the efforts of the leaders to promote better relations between Hindus and Muslims, communal bitterness was on the increase, breaking out into ugly riots all over the country, mainly over the issue of cow slaughter and playing of music in Hindu processions while passing by mosques. Tension between the communities was fostered by the hidden hand of the foreign rulers, who believed in the policy of divide-and-rule, and did everything to keep them apart. Dr. Rajendra Prasad felt that irrational considerations had divided the communities. In vain did he point out that the issues of cow slaughter and music before mosques ignored simple facts. Daily innumerable cows

* *Autobiography* p. 245

are slaughtered for meat in all the cities and towns in India. This was not objected to by the Hindus, but the right of the Muslims to offer cow sacrifice on the *Id* day was being challenged. The leaders in vain pointed out that this right could not be taken away by force but only by mutual consent. This could only be obtained by promoting better relations and understanding between the two communities, leading to mutual regard for the feelings of each other. On the other hand, the Muslims objected to processions of Hindus playing music in front of their mosques on the ground that the noise disturbed them in their prayers. But most of the mosques were situated in busy centres and were subjected to continuous noise from vehicular traffic and other street noises. On the occasion of *Moharrum* the Muslims themselves held processions with music. The leaders urged that the right of Hindus to hold religious processions with music could not be abolished by force but only by mutual consent, and appealed to the good sense of Hindus to respect the feelings of Muslims. But all their appeals fell on deaf ears. The problem was complicated by the tactics of the educated sections of both communities, who hankered after the loaves and fishes of office and official favours and worked under the direction of the Government. Patchwork arrangements were made by the leaders from time to time on the occasions of *Id* and Hindu festivities, but communal hostility was kept alive by the rulers who were scared of the spectre of Hindu-Muslim unity that had made its brief appearance during the *Khilafat* days. Political differences between the communities kept mounting. In 1917 a joint delegation of the Congress and the Muslim League had met Mr. Montagu to press for the grant of constitutional reforms. But much water had flowed under the bridges since then. In 1920 M. A. Jinnah had resigned from the Congress on the issue of non-cooperation, and since then had devoted himself exclusively to the promotion of Muslim interests. In 1926, when the country was shocked at the brutal murder of Swami Shradhanand by a Muslim bigot, even Mohamed Ali, a staunch supporter of Hindu-Muslim unity, had defended the murderer. The two communities went on drifting into opposite camps.

In this general atmosphere of despondency there were hopeful signs that non-violence was still an effective weapon in the

struggle with the Government. The peasants of Bardoli in Gujerat had put up a brave resistance against the preposterous demand of 22 per cent increase in land revenue. They had contended that the enquiry by the Settlement Officer had not been conducted properly and that their ability to pay the increase had been wrongly assessed. They were fortunate in obtaining the leadership of Vallabhbhai Patel, who was himself a man of the soil. At first deeply scornful of the efficacy of non-cooperation to wring justice from the alien rulers, he had been drawn to Gandhiji ever since the Kaira struggle. Blunt in his talk, but with a gentle heart that shared the sufferings of the common man, he knew the Gujerat peasants intimately—both their weakness and their strength. He played upon these so successfully that the peasants offered a determined but non-violent resistance to the Government. He had the rare quality of imparting his firmness in action to the people. The Government bowed to the will of the people, and ordered a fresh enquiry. Ultimately, the increased demand was reduced to 5·7 per cent. The country deeply appreciated the firm lead Patel had given to the people and gave him the unofficial title of *Sardar*, the leader of men. The Bardoli campaign became a model of *satyagraha* in the country and prepared the ground for the future campaign of 1930.

During this quiescent period in political activity, Rajendra Prasad devoted his time to building up the constructive strength of the people. The National University occupied much of his time. Its aim was not to turn out the ordinary brand of graduates but scholars imbued with patriotic fervour and a spirit of public service. But, as he had anticipated, the enthusiasm for this type of education had declined and the number of students had fallen. Lack of financial support from the public had compelled the university to close down many schools. But the brave struggle continued and the students who graduated from these institutions gave a good account of the benefits of such education.

The problem of hunger and unemployment of the masses always loomed large before Rajendra Prasad. In a backward province the bulk of the masses lived on the margin of subsistence and below it. Enormous productive manpower was wasted for lack of opportunities of profitable employment. He

felt that the way to utilise it was the way shown by Gandhiji—restoration of hand-spinning and hand-weaving as national industries. In Bihar the art of spinning had declined and Rajendra Prasad devoted his attention to reviving it. Funds were available from the Tilak *Swaraj* Fund. So far, the efforts in this direction had not borne much fruit because the teachers appointed for this purpose lacked expert knowledge of their work and had not enough faith in their mission. The work was dragging on. Although *khadi* was being produced, yet the business side was so weak that losses were incurred. When the All-India *Charkha Sangh* (Spinners' Association) was established in 1925, Rajendra Prasad was appointed as its agent in Bihar. He took up this work in earnest and devoted himself to organising the production of *khadi*. Technical training was given to the teachers, who were carefully selected. Strict business methods were introduced. New centres were opened and the sale of *khadi* was promoted by holding exhibitions, which popularised its use. Strenuous work had to be done. As Rajendra Prasad says: 'I visited these production centres generally once a year to supervise their work. I stayed for a day or two, sat in the depot, bought yarn and sold cotton, weighing for myself, supervised the weaving and assisted in the fixation of the price of the finished product. My own knowledge of *khadi* work grew and with it grew the realisation that the losses were entirely due to paucity of knowledge of the work'. He also went to Assam to organise the *khadi* work there and toured Andhra explaining the economy and utility of *khadi*, and later published his speeches in book form under the title of *Economics of Khadi*. As the result of his efforts Bihar *khadi* became famous all over India for its cheapness and quality. The vogue of *khadi* increased and this gave employment and bread to a large number of people.

While giving up his practice at the Bar, Dr. Rajendra Prasad had made one exception in respect of the complicated case of his friend Hari Prasad Sinha. Against a favourable verdict in the High Court, an appeal had been filed by the other side before the Privy Council in London. Dr. Rajendra Prasad felt that he was morally committed to see this appeal through and agreed to go to England for this purpose.

The question of an outfit of clothes worried him. Being

unfamiliar with European conventions, he felt that he would be more at ease in Indian-style clothes of Kashmir *khadi*. As he says, he has 'looked at clothes merely as a means of covering the body and a protective against heat and cold. It was difficult for me to change my outlook and habits'. He is a strict vegetarian, and the problem of getting suitable food worried him. Pressed by his client, who knew his habits, he took his servant Goverdhan with him, and after obtaining Gandhiji's blessing at Sabarmati he left for England in March, 1928. In London he worked hard at the case, going to the libraries, the courts and to the lawyers for consultations. He was very impressed with the habits of his Senior Counsel Upjohn, an old man of seventy-five, who conscientiously went through fifteen thousand pages of the case without any assistance and prepared the brief himself. Upjohn's integrity and efficient work impressed him against the background that the Senior Counsel in India invariably demanded assistance and special fees to go through a complicated brief. Upjohn, in turn, was very much impressed by Rajendra Prasad's intelligent grasp and his knowledge of the intricacies of law, and advised him not to give up legal practice. The case ended in a settlement between the parties and this gave Rajendra Prasad a month in hand to spend as he liked. Being a devotee of non-violence he wanted to find out what the anti-war organisations and groups in Europe were doing. He attended a no-war conference in a village near Vienna, where the delegates were urged to undertake anti-war propaganda. To carry out this recommendation Rajendra Prasad went to the town of Graz where he also wanted to meet Doctor Standonath, who had been in correspondence with Gandhiji. Some other delegates also accompanied him. The anti-war meeting was arranged in a restaurant. As soon as the visitors mounted the dais they were assaulted by a group of people who were against the anti-war campaign, and were beaten up while the crowd of about 400 persons looked on. The visitors had to retreat. 'We all reached home bleeding profusely. The doctor dressed my wounds and bandaged my head, treated his wife and then attended to himself.*' He then paid a visit to Romain Rolland who had done so much to popularise

* *Autobiography* p. 280

Gandhiji's teachings in Europe. Walking through the market-place in Neuchâtel, a piece of hand-spun cloth attracted his attention, and he made enquiries where he could get such cloth. He travelled to Munich in search of it but could not get it. Next, he decided to visit a Youth Conference in Holland which was also an anti-war convention. He went to Leipzig to visit Dr. Kuhn whose hip-bath treatment he had been taking. He returned to Bombay in the second week of September, 1928, and proceeded straight to Ahmedabad to meet Gandhiji.

Whatever spare time Rajendra Prasad had during his tour was utilised to meet people who believed in the principle of non-violence. Anti-war conventions attracted him. He also met kindred spirits there. For the lawyers in England he had nothing but praise. They worked conscientiously with integrity and industry. Contrary to the practice in India, every spare moment they had, even in the Courts, was employed in the study of the cases in the library and not in chatting as in the Bar rooms in India. They considered it their duty to go through bulky briefs without assistance and without charging additional fees. He returned to India just before the visit of the Simon Commission.

At a time when political frustration held the stage, like a bolt from the blue came the announcement in November, 1927, that the British Parliament had appointed a Commission to review the working of the political reforms in India. Sir John Simon was Chairman of the Commission and the members were all Englishmen; but they could co-opt Indians as advisory members in every province. The review of the constitutional reforms was not due till 1930. But Lord Birkenhead, who always believed in forcing the pace, had taken early action in the hope that it would weaken the *Swaraj* Party. He also wanted to forestall the possibility of the Labour Party being returned to power and its appointing a Commission of its own choice.

A wave of resentment and indignation had swept over India at this humiliation of the country. Even the moderates in politics felt insulted by the exclusion of Indians from the membership of the Commission. The announcement had the effect of injecting fresh spirit into political activity. It brought all the parties and communities together on a common platform to protest against the outrage on the people of India. The Con-

gress took the view that the appointment of a Commission to examine the fitness of the people for the grant of self-government was an insult to the nation. The moderates and others were scandalised by the exclusion of Indians from the Seven Member Commission. All the Parties decided to boycott the Commission. What happened in Bihar was typical of what happened throughout India. An All-Party Conference decided to put up a joint front to boycott the Commission. To the moderates the boycott meant that no evidence would be given before the Commission. But to the Congressmen a boycott was meaningless unless it also took the shape of a counter-demonstration. The Commission's arrival in Bombay in February, 1928, was a signal for protest demonstrations and *lathi* charges by the police. In Allahabad a peaceful crowd led by Jawaharlal Nehru was charged by mounted policemen using their batons, and Nehru and others received severe injuries. At Lahore Lajpat Rai who had joined a peaceful demonstration was beaten up so severely by the police that he succumbed to his injuries a few days later. In Patna the police chief made an appeal to Rajendra Prasad, who had just returned from Europe, to keep the demonstration peaceful. An arrangement was made whereby the demonstrators and those who were in favour of the Simon Commission would be kept separate in order to prevent any clash between the two. Although the Simon Commission arrived at Patna at an early hour in the winter morning, so much feeling had been aroused that about 30,000 men gathered at the station to voice their protest against the visit of the Commission, and those in favour numbered 200 officials and their peons. Rajendra Prasad made such orderly arrangements that there was no clash between the police and the demonstrators.

One tangible effect of the appointment of the Simon Commission was that it threw a challenge to the political parties in India to come together and frame a Constitution by themselves. The Congress took up this challenge, and its session at Madras decided to co-operate with other parties in order to draft a Constitution. A Conference of all political parties was called in May, 1928, and a Committee was appointed, headed by Motilal Nehru, to draft a Constitution with particular reference to safeguards for minorities. When Rajendra Prasad returned to India the Nehru Committee Report was being discussed

throughout the country. It had recommended dominion status as India's goal. But this was not acceptable to the younger blood in the Congress led by Jawaharlal Nehru and Subhas Bose. Rajendra Prasad felt that dominion status would serve the purpose, as even a dominion within the Commonwealth had complete freedom to manage its own affairs. He argued that 'complete independence no doubt brings prestige to a country, but eventually every country had to seek some sort of relationship, or affiliation, with other countries in the world if it had to be saved from perpetual conflict. The British Commonwealth is an association of free countries and I saw no harm in being a member of it'.* His sense of realism also prevailed, and he said: 'Besides, when we were not in a position to compel the British to concede complete independence to India, I could see no reason to adopt that as the Congress goal and that was why I had opposed the complete independence resolution at the Madras Congress'. The Nehru Committee Report was adopted by the All-Parties Conference from which the Muslims had withdrawn. They were willing to concede joint electorates but had insisted on one-third of the seats in the Central Legislature being reserved for the Muslims and the residuary powers being vested in the provinces. At the Congress session in Calcutta there was a heated controversy regarding the goal recommended by the Nehru Committee. In the interest of maintaining unity within the Congress Gandhiji pressed for accepting the goal of dominion status. He argued: 'If we are sure of the sanction, we need not worry if *swaraj* is spelt dominion status or independence. Dominion status can easily become more than independence if we have the sanction to back it. Independence can easily become a farce if it lacks sanction'. He pleaded that they should make up their minds as to whether it was to be non-violence or violence, and let the rank and file work for the sanction in real earnest, while the diplomats were working on the constitution-making. In view of the conflict of opinion the Congress agreed to a compromise, that is, to accept the report with the proviso that if the British Government did not agree within a year to grant dominion status the goal would be changed to independence.

* *Autobiography* p. 290

CHAPTER VIII

SALT SATYAGRAHA

1929 was a crucial year in Indian politics. The demand of the Congress for grant of dominion status, supported by the All-Parties Conference, hung heavily over the scene. The prospect of revival of civil disobedience was on the horizon.

In the rural areas there was much discontent. The post-war boom was over and economic depression was setting in. The prices of agricultural produce were falling, causing distress to the small farmers who found it difficult to pay the taxes and rents in cash. Political terrorism, born of despair, had been revived, particularly in Bengal, the United Provinces and the Punjab. Ruthless police repression added fuel to the fire. The conspiracy cases against the alleged terrorists had excited great interest all over the country. The patriotic fervour of the prisoners as victims of political frustration had won the admiration of the people. One of them, Jatindra Nath Das, protested against the inhuman treatment of political prisoners. He went on a fast inside the jail to appeal to the conscience of the British authorities. Nothing happened and the fast continued for sixty-one days, when it proved fatal. Public opinion was greatly agitated at the callousness of the Government. Lord Irwin felt that unless some steps were taken to assuage the feelings of the people the situation might take an ugly turn. He discussed the matter with the Labour Government in London. On his return to India, on the 31st of October, 1929, he announced that it was implicit in Mr. Montagu's declaration of 1917 'that the natural issue of India's constitutional progress as there contemplated is the attainment of dominion status'. He also invited the Indian leaders to meet the representatives of the British Government at a Round Table Conference in London. Representatives of all political parties met in Delhi to consider the Viceroy's declaration. They issued a joint manifesto agreeing to participate in the Conference in London provided they were assured that the talks would be conducted on the basis of the grant of dominion status to India. They further stipulated that the Congress should be given predominant representation at the Conference, and as an immediate

gesture of goodwill a general amnesty should be given to all political prisoners.

Dr. Rajendra Prasad was not present at this meeting as he had gone to Burma in response to a request of the tenants of Kyantanga to settle their disputes with their landlord, Mr. Milne, who had gone from Bihar and had set up an agricultural colony there by clearing forest land. His tenants felt that they were not getting a fair deal from him. Rajendra Prasad tried to bring about a compromise, and had almost reached a settlement between them when instructions from London upset the arrangements. However, the tenants were given some relief later on. Rajendra Prasad received a warm welcome at Rangoon and elsewhere. He reminded the Burmese people of the close bonds between India and Burma. He felt that India had built up an empire overseas, not by violence but by the silken threads of a common religion and philosophy of life. 'No political empire could ever receive such a tribute of love and reverence from other people,' he said. On the voyage back from Burma he had a bad attack of asthma and was not able to attend the Lahore session of the Congress in December, 1929.

At this session the main item for consideration was the invitation of the British Government to Indian leaders to attend the Round Table Conference in London. What was not clear to the leaders was whether the British Government was prepared to grant dominion status. On the eve of the session Gandhiji and Motilal Nehru met the Viceroy for a clarification of the intention of the Government. During the talk, it became clear that dominion status was not 'round the corner', as the moderates had argued, but far away. 'The Government statements are always ambiguous,' remarked Rajendra Prasad, 'and the English language lends its subtlety to them. Such statements must therefore be taken with great caution.'

The Congress met at Lahore in an atmosphere of disillusionment regarding the intentions of the British Government. It considered the offer of the Round Table Conference a mockery and rejected it. The goal of complete independence for India was adopted, and it was decided to launch the programme of civil disobedience, including non-payment of taxes in selected areas.

In pursuance of the decision of the Congress, on the 31st of

January, 1930, Gandhiji issued an eleven-point demand, which he felt constituted the substance of independence. Abolition of salt tax was one of the demands. The Government rejected the demands, and Gandhiji felt free to launch civil disobedience. He selected the salt tax for this purpose. When this was discussed Rajendra Prasad had felt very sceptical about this form of *satyagraha*. It was not clear to him how people all over the country could break the salt law. It was easy only in the coastal areas where salt could be manufactured from sea water; but how could the majority of the people living in the interior do it? He also wondered whether the programme would appeal to the educated classes. He had appealed to Gandhiji to substitute for the salt tax the *chowkidari* tax (crop protection tax) which everyone had to pay and which had aroused popular discontent in Bihar. He felt that it would be a better ground for agitation and would be assured of the people's support. Gandhiji did not agree and said: 'Let us first break the salt laws and then we shall be able to launch other no-tax campaigns after popular enthusiasm is aroused'. Like a true soldier Rajendra Prasad accepted his decision. He says; 'I kept silent when I was not quite convinced. I wondered why in Bihar we should break the law of making salt leaving aside all such laws as refusing to pay *chowkidari* tax. But I had faith in Gandhiji's experience and technique of *satyagraha* and his foresight and capacity to lead. So, as was my wont, I placed my views before him but when he did not accept them, I signified my readiness to abide by his'.*

Gandhiji decided to press for abolition of the salt tax. He argued that 'there is no article like salt, outside water, by taxing which the State can touch the starving millions, the sick, the maimed and particularly the helpless. The tax constitutes therefore the most inhuman poll tax ingenuity of man can devise'. He wrote to the Viceroy on the 2nd of March: 'Even the salt the people must use in order to live is so much taxed as to make the burden fall heaviest on him (the poor man), if only because of the heartless impartiality of its incidence. The tax shows itself more burdensome to the poor man, for salt is the one thing that he must eat more than the rich, individually and collectively'. He announced that unless

* *Autobiography* p. 305

the Viceroy could deal with this evil, he would break the salt laws on the 11th of March.

This threat of Gandhiji was treated by the Government with amusement and complacency. 'What would the old man gain by walking to the marshes of Dandi to make a handful of salt?' queried official Delhi; 'another stunt, let him do it,' they said. Little did the British realise the tremendous significance of the proposed move and its effect on the people. On the 12th of March, accompanied by seventy-eight inmates of the Sabarmati *Ashram*, Gandhiji started on his march of 241 miles to the sea coast at Dandi. Enormous crowds gathered at the *ashram* to see him off and Gandhiji hoped that he would not return to the *ashram* until *swaraj* was won. The march assumed the character of a *padayatra* (a pilgrimage on foot) with the object of achieving *purna swaraj* (independence) for India. Surrounded by a religious halo, it evoked memories of similar *yatras* in history and legend. Gandhiji had revived the ancient traditions of India. Prayers all over India were offered for the success of the *yatra*, and people watched with bated interest the progress of the march. At every village he halted on the way and people flocked in thousands to hear him and ask for his blessings. He addressed numerous meetings and urged the people to remain non-violent. He was guarding against violent outbreaks as at Chauri Chaura.

On receiving the news of the march Rajendra Prasad rushed from the Working Committee meeting at Allahabad and met Gandhiji at Jambusar, about a hundred miles from Ahmedabad, and accompanied him for some distance. He had then to return to Bihar to prepare for the 6th of April, when *satyagraha* was to be undertaken throughout the country. In Bihar salt could only be made from saline earth.

Gandhiji reached Dandi on the 5th of April and broke the salt law the next day. This was a signal for country-wide violation of the salt law. The Government, which had been an amused observer, now took alarm at the spirit of defiance among the people. The police were told to fight the *satyagraha*, and they did it in their usual manner of *lathi* charges and firing on unarmed crowds. Mass arrests were made and most of the leaders were put behind bars.

The public demonstrations were generally non-violent.

But they attained dimensions which indicated the strength of the people behind them. In the Frontier Province, under the leadership of the *Khudai Khitmatgars* (Servants of God), popularly known as Red Shirts, the turbulent and hot-blooded Pathans held control of Peshawar city for five days. They showed such rare courage in remaining non-violent when faced with bayonets that two platoons of Garhwali Rifles refused to fire on them and were put under arrest. In spite of heavy censorship the news leaked through and electrified the whole of India. There was amazement as well as admiration for a non-violent resistance that arose not out of weakness but from moral strength. It revived the faith of the people in the potentiality of this weapon. Delhi reacted characteristically and instructed the Frontier Government to wean the Pathans from the Congress and induce them to join the Central Muslim Party which had loyalist leanings. Divide-and-rule was the only policy the Government of India could think of.

When Gandhiji declared his intention to take possession of the salt depot at Dharasna, he was arrested on the 5th of May under an old Regulation III of 1818, and detained without trial. Protest demonstrations and *hartals* were held all over India. The demand for the abolition of the salt tax now took the dimensions of a general resistance to the British rule, which was considered morally indefensible and economically intolerable. Lord Irwin informed Whitehall that 'the movement is serious and has permeated many strata of Hindu society. It has caught their imagination and has swept them off their feet, and obviously has dangerous potentialities'. He added that 'measures of repression are not likely to provide an ultimate remedy for what undoubtedly under much froth and unreality is a national movement'.

Despite the advice of caution, repression was unleashed by the Government throughout India. Within six months ninety thousand persons were arrested. The leaders were the first to be put behind bars. From Dharasna came reports of brutal *lathi* charges. *Satyagrahis* were beaten till they became unconscious and were dragged off in that condition. Badly injured men were removed to temporary hospitals set up by the Congress. These reports aroused a wave of indignation and exasperation throughout the country, and volunteers arrived

in larger numbers to continue the *satyagraha* until the rains set in.

In Bihar salt could only be made out of saline earth and that not in large quantity. *Satyagraha* therefore became largely symbolic. But the police raided the places where salt was made, broke the ovens and pots and pans, arrested some volunteers and beat others. Rajendra Prasad broke the law by selling illicit salt, but he was not arrested. The authorities no doubt felt that he was so genuinely devoted to non-violence that it was better to let him function in public and check violent tendencies. They considered him more of an asset than a liability. He had maintained strict discipline in a large crowd at the time of the Simon Commission demonstrations. His personal relations with the police officers were cordial. Once when his car broke down the police had given him a lift in their car to the place of the meeting which they were to cover. He also showed consideration for them. Because of the large number of Christians in the police force, he did not want them to be compelled to work on Good Friday, and suspended *satyagraha* on that day. Similarly, no *satyagraha* was offered on Friday evenings in order to leave the Muslim constables free for their prayers. But his turn also came.

With the onset of the rains the programme was changed to boycott of foreign cloth and liquor shops. Most of the cloth dealers cooperated with Rajendra Prasad and agreed to seal their stocks of foreign cloth and not offer it for sale. In the village of Bihpur the Congress volunteers started picketing a *ganja* (hemp) shop. The police retaliated by taking possession of the Congress *ashram* and beating the volunteers who decided to offer peaceful *satyagraha* in order to get the *ashram* back from the police. A batch of volunteers would march every afternoon and court arrest. Rajendra Prasad proceeded to the spot where a crowd of about 20,000 had assembled. He appealed to it to be peaceful and non-violent and watched the *satyagraha* from a place in the market. A batch of volunteers arrived and marched towards the *ashram*, and when they got there the police arrested them. The crowd now began to disperse. 'Then a superintendent of police came out of the *ashram* and gave an order to charge the crowd with *lathis*.

That was the signal for an indiscriminate and wild *lathi* charge. The road was soon cleared and the superintendent with some of his men came towards the *bazar* where I was standing along with other leaders, and on seeing us, though we had done nothing, he asked the police to attack us, by using abusive words. I received four or five *lathi* blows but Rangotti Singh, a young volunteer, had run towards me and interposed between me and the policemen and taken many of the blows on himself. Thus my injury was not so serious as it might have been'.*

The Bihar Government now gave discretion to the district magistrates to arrest Rajendra Prasad if they so desired. Although Rajendra Prasad kept moving from one district to another, no district magistrate wanted to arrest him. But early in July his turn came. As he was on his way to address a meeting in a village, he was stopped on the high road and told that he was under arrest and was taken to Chapra jail, where he received a tumultuous welcome from the prisoners. Soon a big crowd gathered outside the jail.

Rajendra Prasad welcomed this opportunity of sharing jail life with other workers. As an undertrial prisoner he was entitled to have food and fruit sent by his brother. But he firmly rejected such concessions and took the same food as was served to other prisoners on an iron plate. The classification of political prisoners in categories A, B and C, on the basis of their social status, standard of living and education, had been introduced by the Government, whose conscience had been awakened by the fast unto death of Jathindra Nath Das. Rajendra Prasad was not happy at this classification of political prisoners, who, he felt, functioned as a team, and preferential treatment of any one of them would destroy the team spirit. Gandhiji had gone even a little further and had said that once in prison the political workers should receive the same treatment as other prisoners. He felt that the living conditions of all prisoners should be improved but no preferential treatment should be accorded to any one. Rajendra Prasad was tried by a magistrate, who was a former client of his, and sentenced to six months' imprisonment. In order to avoid public demonstrations on the route he was taken by a circuitous journey and lodged in Hazaribagh jail.

He took this change in his life with the detachment of mind as of a *rishi* and says: ' We suffered no inconvenience at all in the jail '. He spent his time mostly in reading and spinning. With the jailor's permission he joined the jail workshop and learnt weaving. During the six months he was in this jail he wove about 200 yards of *newar* (bed tape) and fifteen yards of cloth, which he brought out with him when he was released. He also occupied his time in compiling a book of articles written by Gandhiji, classifying them under different headings with a brief introduction for each. The study of religious literature appealed to him, and he read the *Upanishads* and Patanjali's *Yoga Sutra*. Above all he valued greatly the contacts that jail life gave him. He says: ' Despite the fact that I have toured my province a great deal and had met many people from all walks of life, I could say that I never came to know people as closely as I did in the jail. I shall ever cherish the memory of these contacts I had in the Hazaribagh jail '.*

* *Autobiography* p. 324

CHAPTER IX

ROUND TABLE CONFERENCES

By getting the Indian leaders at a conference round the table in London the British Government had hoped to reduce the impetus of the national movement, which was heading towards a crash. But as the Congress was not taken in by the 'empty statement', and declined to participate in it, the conference lost its importance. While the civil disobedience movement continued to gather force in India, the first Round Table Conference met in London on the 12th of November, 1930. It was like the play of *Hamlet* without the Prince of Denmark, for it was apparent that the Congress alone could play the leading part. The Conference was conscious of this and did not take up the main issue of communal representation. It only recorded what the British Government was prepared to give—a federal form of Government with a measure of responsibility, subject to safeguards and reservations.

It then adjourned in the hope that the Congress would agree to cooperate in further discussion, particularly with regard to communal representation. Efforts were made to bring in the Congress. On the 26th of January, 1931, the members of the Working Committee were released from jail to enable them to consider the next move. Rajendra Prasad attended the meeting of the Working Committee summoned by Motilal Nehru, whose health was fast deteriorating, but who continued to work hard though the doctors advised him to take it easy. Rajendra Prasad has recorded his last impressions of him. 'I had the good fortune to live with him at *Swaraj Bhawan* during his last days. I had occasion to see at close quarters his forbearance, his great intellectual abilities and his burning patriotism. He had no thoughts for anything but the national movement and the future of India. It is no exaggeration to say that he had no time to think even of his death.*' This was not far off, and he breathed his last on the 6th of February, 1931. India lost a great and devoted leader.

In an effort to explore the possibility of a peaceful settlement, Gandhiji was persuaded to meet the Viceroy, and on the 17th of

* *Autobiography* p. 328

February began the historic talks between Gandhiji and Irwin. Rajendra Prasad, as a member of the Working Committee, was summoned to Delhi for consultation. The talks were a landmark in the political movement; it was the first occasion on which the British Government agreed to negotiate a settlement with the Congress as a representative organisation of the people. They drew the caustic comment from Winston Churchill: 'It is alarming and nauseating to see Mr. Gandhi, a seditious Middle Temple lawyer, now posing as a *fakir* of a type well known in the East, striding half naked up the steps of the Viceregal Palace, while he is still organising and conducting a defiant campaign of civil disobedience, to parley on equal terms with the representative of the King-Emperor'. Nevertheless, the talks were cordial and frank. Gandhiji consulted the members of the Working Committee from time to time and ultimately reached a settlement on the 5th of March to which the Working Committee agreed after some hesitation. Gandhiji had accepted the offer of self-government with certain safeguards in respect of defence, external affairs, minorities, financial credit of India and discharge of obligations. With regard to the crucial problem of the salt tax the settlement offered only facilities to the people in certain areas for manufacturing salt. The Gandhi-Irwin Pact also provided for a general amnesty to all political prisoners, the immediate cessation of repression and the restitution of confiscated property which had not passed to third parties. The Pact served as a truce and opened the door to participation by the Congress in the Round Table Conference. It was approved by the Congress session at Karachi in March, 1931, and Gandhiji was authorised to represent the Congress at the Conference with the addition of such other delegates as the Working Committee might select. A strong section in the Congress was not happy about the compromise, but as Jawaharlal Nehru put it: 'We have decided to abide by Gandhiji and let us do so until we see the real way blocked for further progress'.

A few weeks after the Delhi Pact Lord Irwin was succeeded by Lord Willingdon, whose antipathy to the Congress was not a secret. The atmosphere became completely changed. The British officials felt that they had lost much ground on account of the Pact and now tried to thwart its implementation. Al-

though *satyagraha* had been suspended, Rajendra Prasad had great difficulty in getting the local officials to agree to release the *satyagrahis* who were still in prison. Similar complaints were heard from other provinces. Gandhiji was ultimately persuaded to go to London in September, 1931, and to join the second Round Table Conference. At this session the communal issue dominated the Conference. The minorities had joined together and claimed representation through separate electorates, and demanded a declaration of civil rights to protect their interests. The Conference could reach no agreement in view of the vitiating atmosphere of communal suspicion and distrust. The National Government, headed by Ramsay MacDonald, declared that if a communal settlement acceptable to all the Indian parties could not be reached, the British Government would announce its own communal award. Gandhiji returned to Bombay on the 28th of December a much disappointed man. Rajendra Prasad felt that the British Government, which had no intention of doing anything, found the lack of communal accord an excuse for its inaction.

The spirit of the truce initiated by the Delhi Pact had departed when Irwin had handed over to Willingdon. It was now replaced by a desire to suppress the Congress, which was considered to be the cause of all the trouble. The officials boasted about it and were given a free hand; a regime of repression was instituted. The Congress decision to launch a non-violent campaign in the United Provinces for withholding payment of rent to the landlords in view of the failure of crops served as an excuse. The Bengal Government flouted the Pact and would not release political prisoners on the plea of special difficulties in the Province. The Congress Committees were declared unlawful organisations, and prominent Congress leaders, including Gandhiji, Vallabhbhai and Jawaharlal Nehru, were arrested. Rajendra Prasad was arrested on the 4th of January, 1932, and lodged in a filthy ward in Bankipore jail. The superintendent of the jail informed him that as an undertrial prisoner he was entitled to get his food from outside. Rajendra Prasad, however, declined to do so and took the same food as the ordinary prisoners. At the trial he was awarded six months' imprisonment. Lord Willingdon had boasted that the Congress agitation would be suppressed within two weeks. Repres-

sion was therefore intensified to its full force. All public meetings and processions were banned. The offices of the Congress Committees were taken possession of and sealed, and their funds were confiscated. Many repressive Ordinances were issued. The prisons were filled to capacity, and common amenities were denied to political prisoners. But the greater the repression, the greater was the resentment of the people.

Rajendra Prasad was elected President of the Congress session to be held in March in Orissa, but as the arrangements could not be made the venue was changed to Delhi. The police arrested Madan Mohan Malaviya who was selected to preside over it in the absence of Rajendra Prasad. By publicly announcing that the session would be held in New Delhi the police were hoodwinked and the session—a symbolic one—was held in Old Delhi.

The Congress had declined to participate in the third session of the Round Table Conference which ended on the 17th of August, 1932. As anticipated, no settlement in respect of communal representation could be reached, and the British Prime Minister announced his communal award. The depressed classes were to get not only separate electorates for twenty years but also the right to contest seats in the general constituencies. Gandhiji felt that this was a great challenge to the Hindu community. It was an attempt to alienate the *Harijans* (depressed classes) from other Hindus. He pointed out that *Harijans* were part of the Hindu community and the grant of separate electorates to them would only perpetuate the curse of untouchability. India had already reaped a bitter harvest of separate electorates for Muslims—which had tended to keep the two communities apart. He therefore decided to fight this award with his life. On the 18th of August he wrote to the Prime Minister that as a protest against the award he would go on a fast unto death from the 20th of September. The Prime Minister replied that unless there was an agreed settlement between the communities the position could not be changed. The fast was begun by Gandhiji on the appointed day. Rajendra Prasad went to Poona and tried to persuade Gandhiji to give up his fast. But Gandhiji remained adamant. The only hope of saving his life was to reach an agreed formula with the *Harijans*. Rajendra Prasad issued an appeal to the country and concluded it by

saying: 'Hindu society is on trial. If it has any life in it, it must now respond with a great and magnificent act'. The rank and file of the *Harijans*, who had a great regard for Gandhiji and appreciated what he had done for them, were in favour of a settlement. They felt that they could not desert Gandhiji in this crisis, and that his death would be a calamity to the nation and would cast a slur on their community. The political *Harijans*, however, argued that their community would not be able to pull its weight in the elections unless the *Harijans* were given separate electorates; otherwise they would continue to be helpless. Ultimately good sense prevailed and a settlement was reached and signed by Dr. Ambedkar and Rajagopalachari. The depressed classes gave up their demand for separate electorates and the Hindus gave them a larger number of reserved seats—in fact double the number. This settlement was accepted by the Prime Minister and, to the relief of millions in the country, Gandhiji broke his fast on the 26th of September.

Gandhiji felt that the grant of political concessions to the *Harijans* was not enough. What was required was the removal of their disabilities by securing for them entry into temples and access to common wells and other public places. An organised campaign was launched to achieve this. *Harijan Sewak Sanghs* were established all over the country to work for the removal of untouchability. Rajendra Prasad devoted himself to this work. He toured the south with Rajagopalachari and appealed to the temple authorities to throw open their doors. Curiously enough this programme did not appeal to the politically conscious *Harijans*, who looked upon temple entry and other concessions as merely a sop to keep them quiet. They argued that their condition could only be improved by their political and economic betterment. A socio-religious approach to a problem that was mainly political would only divert attention from the real issue. On the other hand, many Congressmen resented this diversion of the energy of the workers. To them the main problem was the struggle against the Government. Rajendra Prasad had no such doubts. He firmly believed that constructive work like this would add strength to the national movement. It was necessary to remove the weaknesses in our social structure which the Government had been exploiting. As he has

explained : ' Within the Congress the clash of ideas continued; some emphasising the primacy of political agitation, others, to which school I belonged, believing that once the weaknesses inherent in the social order are removed, all else would follow '.* He never lost faith in this mission and continued to do propaganda for the removal of untouchability.

A keen worker for Hindu-Muslim unity, he joined the Allahabad Unity Conference which had almost reached an agreement; but it was forestalled by the announcement of the British Government conceding the demand of the Muslims by the grant of one-third of the seats in the Central Assembly to them. Obviously the Government did not want the MacDonald award to be changed further by mutual agreement between the communities.

The repression of the Congress movement continued with unabated force. As the Congress committees had been declared unlawful, and their property had been confiscated, it was difficult for them to continue to work in the open. Underground work could not get the same response. All the leaders were behind bars. Doubt and dissension and a spirit of weariness began to creep into the organisation.

Rajendra Prasad had hardly been out of jail for six months, but he felt that his place was in prison with the others, and he decided to court imprisonment. He had not long to wait. Acharya Kripalani approached him for financial assistance to the freedom movement and got a letter from him to a friendly patron at Calcutta. Kripalani was arrested with the letter on his person. He managed to tear the letter to pieces, but the police picked up the fragments and put them together. The result was that when Rajendra Prasad attended Kripalani's trial on the 4th of January, 1933, he was also arrested and sentenced to fifteen months' imprisonment.

This time in jail his health broke down. In July he fell seriously ill with an acute attack of asthma and became very weak. The superintendent of the jail asked the Government to transfer him to Patna hospital for treatment; but no action was taken. His brother, who visited him there, was so shocked at his condition that he approached the Government personally. Ultimately, he was transferred to Patna jail and from there to

* *Autobiography* p. 355

the hospital. His health improved, but the Government grew suspicious of the large number of persons visiting him and thought that he might be directing the *satyagraha* movement from the hospital. He was, therefore, transferred to Bankipore jail where he had a relapse of asthma and had to be sent again to the hospital. He showed no improvement, and in January, 1934, the medical board of the hospital became alarmed at his condition and recommended his release. Rajendra Prasad had received so many pinpricks from the jail authorities that he was wondering whether he should agree to his release. But fate intervened and he was wanted for urgent work outside.

On the 15th of January, 1934, Patna was rocked by a catastrophic earthquake which brought devastation to large areas. As he describes it, 'along with others in the ward I ran out and stood on the lawn opposite. The tremors were so terrific that I found it difficult to keep erect. The tremors were accompanied with gurgling and loud noise, as if a hundred railway trains had started moving together'. Two days later came his order of release along with other political prisoners from the affected areas. The doctors advised him to remain in the hospital. He was still very weak, but the doctors could not hold him back. He insisted on going out to help in relief work. By sheer will-power his weakness was overcome and the work made him feel better and better every day. The Government tried to induce him to join forces with it for relief work and not to set up a separate people's committee. The minister argued that the stock of the Congress was low in the country, and it would not be able to attract necessary donations for relief work. Rajendra Prasad did not agree with him. He felt that relief work by the people would be more effective. He had no doubts of support from the public and felt sure that the country would back the people's committee. His expectations were fully substantiated by later events. A public meeting appointed a Central Relief Committee under the Chairmanship of Rajendra Prasad. Although the tremors had lasted for four to seven minutes only, they had destroyed towns and villages in the northern districts of Bihar covering an area of 30,000 square miles, affecting ten million people. The casualties were enormous, at least 20,000 persons killed, a million houses destroyed, an immense number of

cattle killed and a number of towns and villages devastated.

The Central Relief Committee appealed for contributions in the shape of money, food, clothes and medicines from all over India. The response from all over the country was tremendous. Over three hundred money orders and hundreds of parcels were received every day. Gandhiji, Jawaharlal Nehru and other leaders visited Bihar and gave guidance and encouragement. An army of about 2,000 volunteers was organised and trained. They were housed in straw huts and each volunteer cost only two annas a day for food.

Rajendra Prasad set up an efficient organisation—with not too much red tape and not too loose either. Jayaprakash Narayan was put in charge of the central office. The problem of maintaining proper accounts worried him. At his request Gandhiji sent J. C. Kumarappa, a chartered accountant, to help him. Rajendra Prasad took great care to see that all donations were properly acknowledged. He insisted that every anna and every article received must be put to the best use. In his own words: 'I was very punctilious in this matter, because one has to be careful in handling public money, otherwise it creates unpleasant consequences'.*

As his health improved, he toured all areas and supervised the work being done, and kept systematic notes of what was to be done. The immediate needs of those who had lost their houses and had nothing to eat and nothing to wear had to be met promptly and sympathetically. Food and clothes and other necessities were distributed. As soon as immediate relief had been given, the work of rehabilitation was taken up. Thousands of houses had to be built, and acres and acres of land had to be cleared of sand. New wells and tanks had to be dug to ensure water supply. Gratuitous relief was given only to the sick and the old. All others were required to contribute their labour in removing the debris, constructing wells, clearing tanks and building houses.

As anticipated, the earthquake was followed by floods due to the shifting of river beds. Drainage channels were constructed to maintain a proper flow of water. The work of relief and rehabilitation continued for eighteen months. The utmost economy was observed and the Committee made a

* *Autobiography* p. 368

saving out of the three million rupees received from the public. The efficient, honest, sympathetic and prompt work of the Committee won Rajendra Prasad the admiration and respect not only of Bihar but of the whole of India. It was a revelation of the store of energy and devoted spirit of service that lay in that frail body and behind his simple unassuming manners. Rajendra Prasad feels in his element when rendering service to the afflicted and the needy.

Six months after the earthquake a personal calamity struck Rajendra Prasad. His brother Mahendra Prasad, weakened by malaria while bringing waste land in Assam under cultivation, passed away. He was only eight years older than Rajendra Prasad, but had guided his studies in school and college. Whenever Rajendra Prasad had been faced with a crisis he had turned for advice to his brother. Mahendra Prasad had realised the potentialities in his younger brother and had given him full encouragement. He had even lightened his burden by looking after the family affairs, which encountered rough weather during bad harvests. His brother's death was a great personal loss to Rajendra Prasad, and he felt it very deeply. It also compelled him to take up the burden of looking after the affairs of the estate, which were in a very bad way. Debts had mounted up from the time of his nieces' marriages. Although Rajendra Prasad was against giving dowries and took no dowry on the occasions of his sons' marriages, yet the custom of the caste compelled him to give dowries to the girls of the family. Many people had taken advantage of his brother's generosity. At one stage the debts could all have been cleared by the sale of the house and the non-zamindari land, but the ladies of the family would not permit it. His elder sister, who had been widowed at an early age, was against it. Phuwaji, as she was called, had a commanding voice in the family affairs. In an effort to clear the debts his brother had dabbled in a rice mill and an electric supply company. But owing to bad management the rice was sold below cost and the electric supply company did not improve matters. After the death of his brother the extent of indebtedness was ascertained; Rajendra Prasad was appalled by the revelation that the debts could only be liquidated by disposing of all their assets. Not being money-minded, he felt helpless and turned to Jamnalal

Bajaj for advice and help. All lands and properties, including family valuables and shawls, were handed over in payment of debts. Jamnalal paid all the debts and leased the estate to Rajendra Prasad's younger son at an annual rent covering the interest and an instalment of the principal. Rajendra Prasad says: 'Those were the darkest days of my life and I found the debt a heavy burden on my life'.

At this juncture Gandhiji pressed him to accept the Presidency of the next session of the Congress in October. Rajendra Prasad did not think it would be proper for him to accept the honour while he was in debt, but after Jamnalal Bajaj had settled the debts he felt free to accept it.

CHAPTER X

1934

It was at a critical stage in the national movement that Dr. Rajendra Prasad was called upon to preside over the Congress session in 1934, the first regular session after an interval of three and a half years—a period of test and tribulation. At the beginning of 1932 the Congress had been declared an unlawful organisation, and the ban had continued up to June, 1934. During this period the enthusiasm of the people had cooled down. The momentum of the movement which had risen to a peak at the time of the salt *satyagraha* had received a severe setback. The ruthless repression given rein by Lord Willingdon had taken a heavy toll. The Ordinances had spread their nets wide and the activities of the Congress had been driven underground. The prisons were filled to overflowing. The Government had discovered that sentences of imprisonment had little deterrent effect on the Congress workers and that it would be more effective to levy substantial fines which would impoverish their families. The magistrates were therefore instructed to substitute sentences to heavy fines for imprisonment. The sacrifices demanded of the Congress workers put such a strain on them and their families that the membership gradually fell off to about half a million. The hard core of the devoted workers remained intact. But there were many newcomers who were not prepared for the turn of events. There was a larger number of opportunists who, as the Congress stock kept rising, were guided by the natural impulse to be on the winning side. The membership had thus become heterogeneous, and the half-hearted and the opportunists, who had joined the Congress with mental reservations, could not stand the test. The sacrifices demanded of them were not supported by their faith in the movement. Some workers even felt that courting imprisonment was a negative approach to life and served no purpose. It had no effect on the rulers, who had grown callous and impervious to public opinion. Consequently, a spirit of weariness and exhaustion had overtaken the people. Gandhiji, who had a knack of knowing the needs of the time, had become conscious of this and had tried to persuade the Viceroy to cancel the drastic Ordinances and to release political pri-

soners. But he got no response from the Government until he called off civil disobedience in April, 1934. The Government had then responded in June, 1934, by lifting the ban on the Congress and releasing most of the political prisoners.

In this atmosphere the Congress session was held in Bombay on the 26th of October, 1934. Rajendra Prasad was given a rousing reception by the people, thus indicating their support of the Congress and their confidence in him. Setting aside the usual procedure of reading out the long printed presidential address, he read out only parts of it, for he knew 'that people do not like the printed addresses, copies of which they had in their hands, to be read in full'. He conducted the proceedings with firmness and was so impartial that at one stage he would not permit Pandit Madan Mohan Malaviya to speak again on the same subject. Gandhiji, who was not present at the session but had followed the proceedings through a loudspeaker, asked him the next day jokingly how he could prevent a person like Malaviya from speaking. Rajendra Prasad replied: 'I am sorry for that but my decision was as President of the Congress and not as Rajendra Prasad. I have great regard for him but I could not give him a privilege which I was not prepared to give to others'.*

The Congress considered the constitutional proposals of the Government—embodied in the White Paper—which were the result of six years of labour by the Simon Commission, the Round Table Conferences and the British Cabinet. For the provinces autonomy was proposed. But for the federal government at the centre there was a loose structure, with heavy weightage in favour of the princes and the minorities. Responsible government was reduced to a mockery by the provision of discretionary powers, reserve powers and safeguards for discharge of special responsibilities vested in the Viceroy. There was a heated discussion at the session as to whether the communal award should be rejected specifically. Madan Mohan Malaviya pointed out that the award was inequitable and should be separately condemned. But it was felt that the rejection of the White Paper, which embodied the award, would be more suitable. The Congress opposed the proposals contained in the White Paper and demanded that

the Constitution of India should be framed by a Constituent Assembly representing the people of India.

Gandhiji's decision to withdraw from the Congress dominated the next day's session. Rajendra Prasad in his presidential address supported Gandhiji's decision on the ground that Gandhiji had desired to remove himself from the stage in order to give scope to other leaders to think for themselves. The impression that whatever was done was according to Gandhiji's wishes should be removed. He explained that although Gandhiji had always encouraged full discussion, there was a tendency even among able and experienced leaders to surrender their opinions to his wishes. There was no doubt that Gandhiji's personality was so overpowering that many leaders succumbed to his magnetic appeal. He wanted, therefore, to remove the cult of personality from the Congress so that it should grow free and unfettered. Gandhiji declined an appeal to reconsider his decision, but assured the Congress that he would always be available for consultation. In effect, his withdrawal was not of great significance. He could never divest himself of the Congress, nor could the Congress act on any important issue without his guidance and advice.

The other problem before the session was the definition of its economic policy. The rightists within the Congress felt the need of assuring the public that the Congress was not in a hurry to implement its radical economic programme. In his *Whither India?* Jawaharlal Nehru had said: 'I have no doubt that coercion or pressure is necessary to bring about political and social change in India. Non-violence is no infallible creed with me, and although I greatly prefer it to violence, I prefer freedom with violence to subjection with non-violence'. This had created a stir among a large section within the Congress. In order to reassure them the Working Committee, in June, 1934, had declared that it was against any measure of confiscation of property and that class war was forbidden by the Congress creed of non-violence. This meant that the Congress was not in favour of radical change in economic matters. The socialist element in the Congress, led by Narendra Deo and Jayaprakash Narayan, felt that the Congress had swung over to the Right and decided to secede from it and formed the Congress Socialist Party.

The Congress also turned its attention to internal matters of organisation. Gandhiji had suggested the need of putting more energy into it. The existing constitution gave representation in the All-India Congress Committee to each provincial committee on the basis of population, irrespective of membership. The constitution was amended to provide for one representative on the A.I.C.C. for every 500 members, subject to certain safeguards regarding proportion to population. Thus each provincial committee was given a voice in the A.I.C.C. in proportion to its member-strength, and the amendment had the effect of making the provincial and district committees more active in increasing the membership of the Congress.

Under the leadership of Rajendra Prasad the session laid particular emphasis on the constructive programme—removal of untouchability, encouragement of *khadi*, promotion of Hindu-Muslim unity and work for prohibition and *swadeshi*. On the whole the session was marked by a good deal of realistic thinking and an effort to put the house in order.

The lure of the elections to the Central Legislature, to be held in November, had attracted many Congress workers who were in favour of reviving the *Swaraj* Party to carry on the political struggle in the legislatures. It was felt that the elections would also reveal the extent of the hold of the Congress over the public. Without changing his views on the utility of the legislatures, Gandhiji had approved of this move, which was endorsed by the All-India Congress Committee in May, 1934, and finally sanctioned at this session.

Having obtained the mandate from the Congress, the workers now concentrated on the elections. Rajendra Prasad also did a whirlwind tour of many provinces. The election result was an eye-opener to those who had doubted the support of the Congress. The people showed their confidence in the Congress, which secured forty-four out of forty-nine general seats. The voting showed that the people were solidly behind the Congress in all provinces except Bengal, which was sullen because the representation of the Hindus had been reduced from forty-four per cent to thirty-nine per cent as the result of the grant of extra seats to the *Harijans* under the Poona settlement. Madan Mohan Malaviya's Congress Nationalist Party got eleven seats and the Independents secured twenty-two seats.

In a house of 130 the combined strength of the nationalist groups could outvote the Government blocs.

Rajendra Prasad devoted himself to revitalising the Congress organisation which had grown limp and listless during its four years of banishment. He was the first President of the Congress to undertake a systematic tour throughout the country, addressing the workers, getting into personal contact with them and giving them guidance and encouragement. He had a warm reception everywhere. Big processions and elaborate welcomes generally embarrass him, 'but I had to submit to them as they were tributes to the office of the President'.

In Maharashtra what impressed him was the efficiency and discipline of the Congress workers and the clockwork regularity with which the programme was carried out. They maintained exemplary traditions. In the Punjab he was struck by the sharp internal differences among the Congressmen. Two rival groups held the stage and each claimed that Rajendra *Babu* should stay with it. Internal squabbles dislocated the programme, and he was taken out in a procession in torrential rain and got drenched. In the evening he developed a temperature. The two rival groups could not even agree on which doctor or *vaid* should attend on him. The doctor called by one group was not liked by the other, who wanted to call a doctor of its own choice. From allopathy they changed to homeopathy. The time allotted for the tour was mostly spent in bed.

During his tenure he made a single-handed attempt to reach an agreement with Jinnah to modify the communal award. Success was within his grasp. A satisfactory formula was evolved. But Jinnah insisted that it should be ratified by Madan Mohan Malaviya, in order to bind the Hindu Mahasabha to it. This was not practicable and the prospect of presenting a united front to the Government was lost.

Jawaharlal Nehru, who was elected President of the next session to be held in Lucknow, was dissatisfied with what had happened at the last session. He largely shared the views of those who had formed the Socialist Party, but kept within the Congress because of his faith in Gandhiji's leadership. Rajendra Prasad represented the views of a large section of the Congress when he said: 'Most of us had as little understanding of socialism as faith in it'. As Nehru had some misgivings about the

support of the members of the Working Committee, Dr. Rajendra Prasad assured him that there would be no difficulties. On the 19th of December, 1935, he wrote to him: 'I know that there is a certain difference between your outlook and that of men like Vallabhbhai and Jamnalalji.... I believe that unless a radical change comes to be made in the programme and methods of our work it will still be possible for all of us to continue to work together. The difficulties are inherent in the situation and it seems to us it is not possible to force the pace or cause any wholesale change'. In personal discussion with him he found that there were differences of opinion on some matters. But as he says: 'The differences were not so much on the Congress programme or procedure as in our attitudes. Even if both of us agreed on a given matter, we usually had two different ways of tackling it'.*

As President of the Nagpur session of the *Hindi Sahitya Sammelan* (Literary Conference) in 1935, Dr. Prasad had to deal with acute differences among the protagonists of the Hindi language. The controversy had taken a communal turn. In his address Rajendra Prasad maintained that Hindi and Urdu were not separate languages. They had the same structure and grammar. They differed only in their vocabularies. The Hindi writers borrowed from Sanskrit and the Urdu writers from Persian and Arabic. He pointed out that a living language must enrich its vocabulary by coming into contact with other languages. Care should, however, be taken to see that the imported words submit to the discipline of Hindi grammar. The gulf between modern Hindi and Urdu had tended to widen. He felt, therefore, that it would be better to encourage a language for common use in public gatherings and for literary work, to be called Hindustani, which would be intelligible to both the sections. He urged that borrowing of foreign words, particularly for technical and scientific terms, was necessary and unobjectionable. The English language had borrowed freely from Latin, and we should borrow from Sanskrit, Arabic or even English. He reiterated his faith in one language for the whole country, and this could only be Hindi. It should be a simple Hindi which should adopt words from all Indian languages and dialects.

The Hindi Literary Conference had two objectives. It wanted to popularise Hindi in non-Hindi areas and at the same time to maintain a high literary standard of the language. It formulated a programme of action accordingly, and set up the *Prachar Samiti* for the promotion and development of Hindi and the *Rashtrabasha Prachar Samiti* for the popularisation of Hindi in non-Hindi areas. Rajendra Prasad was elected President of the latter, which has done good work in Orissa, Assam, Madhya Pradesh and Gujerat, the rest of the territory being covered by *Dakshana Bharat Hindi Prachar Sabha*.

CHAPTER XI

1935

As anticipated by Rajendra Prasad, the socialistic elements in the Congress, after the reverses sustained while pushing forward their radical economic and social programme at the Bombay session, hoped that Jawaharlal Nehru, as President of the next session at Lucknow, would help them to retrieve their position. Nehru had given his blessings to the newly-formed Congress Socialist Party but would not join it, for he felt that India's goal could best be achieved under Gandhiji's leadership. Nevertheless, as President, he tried to inject socialism into the Congress organism; the peasants were getting restive under the stress of economic depression. As the outgoing President, Rajendra Prasad had assured Nehru that, unless a radical change was made, it would be possible for all in the Congress to work together. He had advised cautious advance, but Nehru was in a great hurry to implement his ideas, and sponsored socialistic resolutions at the session. But the Congress was not prepared for them, and he could not convince the All-India Congress Committee, which rejected some of the resolutions and amended others. Nehru, however, accepted the decision of the Committee as he had 'no desire to force the issue in the Congress and thereby create difficulties in the way of our struggle'.

The Act of 1935 had also come into effect. Nehru called it a 'charter of slavery'. He expressed the view that the elections to the provincial legislatures should be contested but that the Congress should refuse to accept office under the Act. At the session, however, it was decided that the question of taking office should be kept open till after the elections.

While selecting the members of his Working Committee, Nehru retained ten members of the rightist way of thinking and brought in four new members with leftist views. A clash was inevitable and it occurred in June, 1936, when Rajendra Prasad sent a letter of resignation on behalf of six members of the Committee, including Sardar Patel, Rajagopalachari and himself. He said: 'We feel that the preaching and emphasising of socialism by the President. . . , while the Congress had

not adopted it, is prejudicial to the best interests of the country and to the success of the national struggle for freedom, which we all hold to be the first and paramount concern of the country. You also feel and have even expressed that the Working Committee... is not of your choice but was forced upon you and that you accepted it against your better judgment. Our own impression of events is contrary to yours.... The effect of your propaganda on the political work immediately before the nation, particularly the programme for election, has been very harmful....'. Gandhiji intervened in what might have been a crisis and the resignations were withdrawn. Unity within the Congress was achieved by deciding to devote all attention to the elections to the provincial legislatures.

The whole of 1936 was taken up with preparations for the elections to be held early in 1937. A Parliamentary Board was set up with Sardar Patel as Chairman and Rajendra Prasad and Moulana Azad as members. Its primary task was the selection of the candidates, who numbered about 2,000. The electorate had increased from 8·7 million in 1919 to 35 million under the new Act, owing to the lowering of the property qualification. Active campaigning became necessary in order to reach such large numbers. The election manifesto, issued by the Working Committee, declared that political independence was the goal of the Congress. It pressed for setting up a Constituent Assembly to frame the Constitution of India. It promised a broad economic and social programme including land reforms, better standard of living, improvement of labour conditions and introduction of prohibition throughout the country. It condemned the new Constitution imposed by the Act of 1935 and declared its intention of not cooperating with it in any way.

As a member of the Parliamentary Board Rajendra Prasad came into contact with persons seeking nomination by the Congress Party. He was distressed to find that many Congress workers claimed such nomination as a reward for their work in the Congress and hoped that it would lead to some office in the Government. Ambition to hold a post of authority had replaced the urge to serve the country, and office was sought as a means of personal advancement. This was a rude shock to him, for he was of the firm opinion that public workers should

not hanker after office but should leave it to those who had the right to nominate to decide who was the fittest person. He has adhered to these principles personally and has never claimed any position of authority or influence. But how few were there imbued with his spirit of service!

The Congress leaders toured the country for the election campaign. Rajendra Prasad not only worked in his own province, but visited the United Provinces, Maharashtra and Karnatak. The results of the elections were very favourable to the Congress, which still continued to have the confidence of a large majority of the people. Out of 1585 seats the Congress secured 715. In Madras, Bihar, Orissa, the Central Provinces and the United Provinces the Congress got absolute majorities. In Bombay it got nearly half the total strength. In Bengal and Assam the Congress was the largest single party. In the Punjab, Sind and the Frontier Province, which had Muslim majorities, the Congress did not fare so well.

The question now to be considered was whether the Congress should accept office. It was decided, on Gandhiji's advice, that as the Congress had objected to the Governors' special powers, it should not assume responsibility unless the Governors gave assurances that they would not exercise those powers. The leaders of the Congress Parties, when summoned by the Governors, asked for such assurances. The Governors declined to give them on the ground that they had no authority to nullify the Constitution in this manner. The Congress remained firm, and the Governors formed Interim Ministries which could function for a maximum period of six months without going to the legislatures. It was hoped that they might be able to wean some members from the Congress Party. But this proved a futile undertaking. After three months the Viceroy announced that, although the special powers would remain vested in the Governors, they would not normally be used by them. He added: 'It is only when an issue between a Governor and his Minister constitutes a serious disagreement that any question of severing their partnership would arise'. This undertaking was acceptable to the Working Committee, and the Congress Parties in the provinces were authorised to form ministries. A few days later, in June, 1937, the Congress ministries assumed office in eight out of the eleven provinces.

In five provinces the absolute Congress majorities presented no difficulty. In Bombay the Congress with the help of other nationalist groups secured a majority. Similarly, in the Frontier Province and Assam the Congress Parties joined the nationalist groups to form the ministries. Only in the Punjab, Sind and Bengal the Congress continued to be in a minority.

The Congress ministries had now a dual programme to carry out. The struggle for independence had to be continued by them. Simultaneously, they had to use their power in the legislatures to improve administration and to carry out socio-economic reforms. Although Rajendra Prasad was not in the Bihar ministry, yet his advice was sought on all important matters of policy. The manner in which he guided the Bihar Government in carrying out land reforms is typical of his method of working. He stressed the necessity of reaching an amicable settlement between the representatives of the *zamindars* and the *kisans*. This procedure would secure quick results and also cooperation of all parties in enacting tenancy legislation and later in implementing it. The talks between the leaders of *zamindars*, *kisans* and the Government were held at Rajendra Prasad's residence in *Sadaqat Ashram*. These discussions continued for some time and ultimately a settlement was reached regarding reduction of rent, right of the tenant to transfer his holding, recovery of arrears of rent and the system of payment of rent in kind. As soon as the agreement was reached a Bill was introduced in the legislature and it was passed before the Congress ministries resigned. As a contrast, in other provinces such reforms lingered on. In Orissa the Bill could not be passed at all, and in Madras no progress was made beyond the stage of obtaining the report of a Committee appointed for the purpose. The same happened in Bengal. In the Central Provinces no agreement could be reached and the work was held up. Dr. Rajendra Prasad has always believed in the middle way of reaching a settlement—with the consent of the parties concerned—as the only lasting solution of a problem. He invariably wants to avoid conflict and controversy which cloud the issue and vitiate the atmosphere in reaching an agreement fair to all parties. Such amicable settlements also have the merit of removing obstacles to the implementation of the measures.

The Congress ministries soon had an opportunity of demonstrating that they were not enamoured of office. They had undertaken to release all political prisoners, but the Governors of the United Provinces and Bihar were unwilling to release the prisoners who had been repatriated from the Andamans. But when the ministries tendered their resignations, the Governors agreed to release the prisoners and pressed the ministries to continue in office.

Early in 1939 Rajendra Prasad was actively involved in a Party crisis on the eve of the Tripuri session of the Congress. Subash Bose, who was masterful, impulsive and self-willed, decided to seek re-election to the office of President of the Congress. Contrary to the usual practice he did not consult Gandhiji or the Working Committee, but decided to ignore them and relied on his direct contacts with the Congress committees. Gandhiji's nominee for the Presidentship was Moulana Azad, who declined the office as soon as he learnt that there would be a contest. Pattabhi Sitaramayya was nominated just before the election. It was the first time that there was a contest for the election of the President, and Bose's electioneering methods gave him a majority. But the friction between Bose and the Working Committee continued. Early in February Bose reiterated his charge that the old guard in the Working Committee was in favour of a compromise on the federation issue. Twelve members of the Committee resigned in disgust. The three who remained were Bose himself, his brother Sarat and Jawaharlal Nehru. Those who resigned, Sardar Patel and Rajendra Prasad being prominent among them, felt that Bose had no confidence in them and they must, therefore, give him freedom to nominate his own men, who would help him to draft resolutions for the Subjects Committee. They also wanted freedom to oppose any resolutions which might be brought in by the President. Subash Bose was ill at the time and took no action on the resignations.

The Tripuri session, therefore, met in an atmosphere of tension. Subash Bose did not command a majority in the All-India Congress Committee, which formed the Subjects Committee of the Congress. When the session opened on the 7th of March, he was confined to bed. On the next day when Bose attended Govind Vallabh Pant moved a re-

solution in the Subjects Committee expressing confidence in the Working Committee and deep regret at the aspersions cast upon it by Bose, and requesting the President to appoint the Working Committee in accordance with the wishes of Gandhiji. This resolution was carried. In the open session Bose recommended that an ultimatum be issued to the Government—to be followed by launching mass civil disobedience. The next day Bose again fell ill and Moulana Azad took the chair. Bose's supporters created turbulent scenes, but ultimately the censure resolution of the Working Committee was passed and Bose's resolution was rejected. Subash Bose was not willing to form the Working Committee as directed by the Congress and his position became untenable. Talks between him and Gandhiji failed in the absence of a common approach. Six weeks after the session Bose resigned. He was obsessed by the idea that he did not have the support of Gandhiji and that the old guard was opposed to his ideas. His methods were unconventional, and he wanted to play a lone hand. He had become the stormy petrel of the Congress.

Rajendra Prasad, together with Sardar Patel, had taken an active part in vindicating the honour of the Working Committee. He was now sounded as to whether he would accept the Presidentship, but he was most unwilling. He disliked being drawn into this or any other controversy more than was strictly necessary. He also had to make preparations for holding the next session in Bihar. He thought that he would not be able to improve matters and that the rot would stop only when elections were held for a new President. But all his arguments were of no avail when Gandhiji directed him to take up this responsibility.

The All-India Congress Committee appointed Rajendra Prasad as the President. Subash Bose did not take his defeat gracefully and wanted to continue the battle with the Working Committee. An opportunity came when the All-India Congress Committee issued directives to all the provincial Congress committees to cease attacking the Congress ministries. Bose decided to organise protest demonstrations against the directives. Rajendra Prasad appealed to him not to do so, but demonstrations were organised at various places in defiance of the All-India Congress Committee. Rajendra Prasad had

a soft corner for Bose who had been twice elected President. His patriotism, sincerity and sacrifices were beyond question. His brother, Sarat Bose, was his college companion and friend. Nevertheless, the interest of the Congress demanded that action should be taken against the defiant attitude of Subash Bose. As he says: 'Now the question was not one of personal likes or dislikes but one of duty, of deciding whether the Congress could keep quiet in the face of a setback to its prestige. We were, therefore, constrained to expel Subash Bose from the Congress'.* Bose was removed from the office of President of the Bengal Provincial Congress Committee and disqualified from holding any elective office for three years. This led to the formation of the Forward Bloc by Subash Bose. Most of its supporters were disgruntled and disappointed men.

Rajendra Prasad found his second term as President most unpleasant. He had to deal personally with complaints against the Congress ministries in Orissa and the Central Provinces. In Orissa the complaints had been made by a prominent Congressman. Rajendra Prasad examined them in detail and found there was no substance in them. He called upon the complainant to apologise for making false allegations. The apology was tendered and the matter was dropped. He also personally examined the complaints against the ministry in the Central Provinces and made a report to the Working Committee, which agreed with him. He felt that so much of his time was taken up by these enquiries that he hardly got any opportunity to do anything constructive during this second tenure of Presidentship.

* *Autobiography* p. 490

CHAPTER XII

1939

THE work of the Congress ministries in the provinces was soon overshadowed by the gathering clouds of war in Europe. On the 15th of March, 1939, German troops marched into Prague, and Czechoslovakia capitulated. Within three weeks Mussolini invaded Albania. Hitler then turned his attention to Danzig and Poland, and marched into Poland on the 1st of September. Rajendra Prasad watched these developments with dismay and anguish. His heart all along was with Britain. Germany's war aims and tactics of attacking the weaker nations, one by one, repelled him. He was deeply distressed by Hitler's onslaught on the weaker nations and felt that it was India's duty to help the British. But his sympathy for Britain was overshadowed by an acute feeling of resentment and exasperation, because Britain continued to ignore and evade India's demand for freedom.

The Congress had been keenly watching the mounting tide of war in Europe. On the 11th of August, 1939, the Working Committee, guided by Jawaharlal Nehru who had just returned from Europe, defined its attitude to the war. It condemned the Fascist aggression in Europe, Africa and the Far East, as well as the betrayal of democracy by British imperialism in Czechoslovakia and Spain. The resolution stated: 'The past policy of the British Government as well as recent developments demonstrated abundantly that this Government does not stand for freedom and democracy and may at any time betray these ideals. India cannot associate itself with such a Government or be asked to give her resources for democratic freedom which is denied to her and which is likely to be betrayed'. The Working Committee further directed the 'provincial governments to assist in no way the war preparations of the British Government and to keep in mind the policy laid down by the Congress to which they must adhere. If the carrying out of this policy leads to resignations or the removal of the Congress ministers, they must prepare for this contingency'.

On the 1st of September the Viceroy proclaimed India a belli-

gerent without consultation with the legislature. A more precise attitude towards the war had now to be formulated by the Congress. Gandhiji discussed the situation with the Viceroy, and on the 4th of September declared his sympathy with Britain and advised India to give unconditional help to her. The nature of the assistance to be given was not clarified—whether it should be only non-violent or active assistance in the war. But the Working Committee, in its meeting on the 14th of September, stated:

‘If this war is to defend the *status quo*, imperialist possessions, colonies, vested interests and privileges, then India can have nothing to do with it. If, however, the issue is democracy and a world order based on democracy, then India is intensely interested in it. And if Great Britain fights for the maintenance and extension of democracy, then she must necessarily end Imperialism in her own possessions, establish full democracy in India, and the Indian people must have the right of self-determination by framing their own constitution through a Constituent Assembly. . . . With her vast resources, India must play an important part in any scheme of world reorganisation. But India can only do so as a free nation, whose energies have been released to work for this great end.’

The feeling in the Working Committee was that the Congress was committed to non-violence only in its fight for freedom but not in its defence from external aggression. India could not refuse to help the British and might even help with men and arms. But it insisted that the British Government should first declare its war aims; and if they were satisfactory the Congress would help in the war effort. Gandhiji had declared that whatever cooperation was to be given should be given unconditionally. He did not subscribe to the view that Britain’s difficulty was India’s opportunity, but he felt that the grant of independence to India was the natural corollary of the British professions with regard to democracy. Rajendra Prasad’s view was that though the Congress was wedded to non-violence it should not refuse to help the British, even with men and arms, if the British Government would respond to the people’s desire for freedom.

At the invitation of the Viceroy Rajendra Prasad and Jawaharlal Nehru met him on the 2nd of October. They demanded

an unambiguous declaration from the Government, giving absolute freedom to India at the end of the war and providing for the setting up of a Constituent Assembly with unfettered liberty to frame the Constitution. They also demanded an immediate share of power in the Central Government. A week later the All-India Congress Committee passed a resolution condemning Fascist and Nazi aggression and demanding a declaration granting independence to India.

The Viceroy would not agree to this. On the 17th of October he stated that Britain's war aims had already been declared in the Prime Minister's statement, and gave an undertaking that at the end of the war an amendment to the Constitutional Act of 1935 would be considered in consultation with representatives of all the parties. He further announced that he would set up a consultative group, representing all major political parties, in order to associate public opinion with the conduct of the war. As this statement failed to satisfy the Congress a meeting of the Working Committee was called to consider whether the Congress ministries should continue to function in the provinces. Opinion within the Committee was divided on this issue. Some members opposed the idea of resignation on the ground that the ministries would be deprived of an opportunity of working within their limited field and of doing some good. Others, including Dr. Rajendra Prasad, felt that the position of the ministries was likely to become untenable, as power would be concentrated in the Viceroy; and the ministries might even be called upon to collect funds and assist in mobilising resources of supplies and men for the armed forces. The Congress ministries were accordingly directed to tender their resignations, which they did in November, 1939. Later events justified this attitude. Ordinances were passed vesting extraordinary powers in the Viceroy. The Defence of India Act gave overriding powers to the Central Government in the interest of the war effort. The ministry in Bengal continued to remain in power, but was unable to control the situation that culminated in a disastrous famine. The Punjab and Sind ministries were forced to take many measures contrary to their own judgment.

Rajendra Prasad had no doubt that the decision to withdraw

the ministries was the right one. Had they continued, he thought, the ministries would have been unable to do any good and would have become mere tools in the hands of the Governor for furthering the war effort. However, his sympathy was strongly with Britain. He says:

‘I cannot say that I would have liked Britain to be defeated in the war. I could not certainly reconcile myself to a German victory... I was deeply distressed, because Hitler made it clear that he would not let any weaker nation survive. My feeling of anger against the British Government for denying India her rights was somewhat assuaged and I somehow felt that it was our duty to help the British Government in defeating Germany and help stop the rot. I was so much overpowered by these thoughts that I could not help issuing a statement to this effect. I am sure that many Congressmen felt as I did. In spite of the weakness of the British Government and its unjust treatment of India, the German aggression had so much staggered us that for the moment we all forgot the acts of the British imperialists. It would, therefore, be untrue to say that the Indians welcomed the adversity of the British as their opportunity.’*

When the Congress ministries went out of office, Jinnah took full advantage of the situation. The 1937 elections had been catastrophic for the Muslim League, which had secured only five per cent of the Muslim votes cast. It was therefore in a mood to form a coalition government with the Congress Party, but the Congress had not seized the opportunity. In the United Provinces several Muslims elected to the assembly as Independents were inclined towards the Congress and were willing to arrive at some working arrangement with it. But the Congress had insisted on these Muslims seeking re-election on the Congress ticket. Rajendra Prasad felt that if the situation had been handled properly the Muslims would have been won over and the Muslim League would have lost their support. He says:

‘Possibly if the proposed agreement between the Independent Muslims and the Congress had materialised, the communal animosity which the Muslim League whipped up later might never have been brought about.’ But, ‘looking back, I am still of the view that we did not commit any constitutional

impropriety. So long as we were wedded to democracy and accepted the British system of parliamentary government, we did nothing in thought or deed to infringe those conventions. It is a different matter if one thinks that we should not have followed the British system and should have developed our own conventions.’*

Unfortunately, the decision in the United Provinces, which was to be crucial for India, hinged not only on ideological considerations but also on personal factors. Those who were active and commanded a following among the Muslims did not find favour with the Congress authorities, who put their faith in such men as were completely amenable to the local hierarchy.

The threat of civil disobedience, held out by the Ramgarh session of the Congress in March, 1940, widened the breach between the Congress and the Government, giving an opportunity to the Muslim League to strengthen its hold over the Muslims. As Chairman of the Reception Committee Rajendra Prasad had made elaborate arrangements for the session, but they broke down owing to heavy rainfall on the previous day, and even during the session it kept drizzling; therefore Rajendra Prasad condensed his address into a few words. Moulana Azad, as President, addressed the session for a minute or two. The resolutions were approved by the Working Committee and the A.I.C.C. It was a brisk and business-like session but had to end abruptly as the arrangements for water supply and electricity had broken down. Moulana Azad stressed the need of a clear decision—whether it was to be cooperation or non-cooperation with the Government. The session decided in favour of launching civil disobedience, but the Congress was prepared to reconsider it if there was a favourable gesture from the British Government.

In order to enlist the people’s support in the war effort the Government now relied more and more on the Muslim League. Mr. Jinnah remarked: ‘After the war constitutionally there came a change in the attitude to me. I was treated on the same basis as Mr. Gandhi. I was wonderstruck why all of a sudden I was promoted and given a status side by side with Mr. Gandhi’.

* *Autobiography* p. 447

† *Transfer of Power*, by V. P. Menon, p. 59

The Viceroy kept in close touch with Jinnah on whom he continued to lean more and more for support. On the 18th of September the Working Committee of the Muslim League had passed a resolution asking for an assurance from the Government that no declaration regarding the question of constitutional advance for India would be made without the consent and approval of the Muslim League. As soon as the Congress ministries resigned office, the Muslim League started to strengthen its organisations. Early in December Jinnah called upon the Muslims throughout India to observe the 22nd of December as the day of deliverance from 'the tyranny, oppression and injustice of the Congress regime in the Provinces'.

The Muslim League held its annual session in Lahore towards the end of March. Jinnah in his presidential speech said: 'Islam and Hinduism are not religions in the strict sense of the word, but are in fact different and distinct social orders, and it is only a dream that the Hindus and the Muslims can ever evolve a common nationality'. He declared that 'democracy was unsuited to India' and that 'the Muslims are a nation according to any definition of a nation and they must have their homelands, their territory and their State'. At this session what is known as the Pakistan Resolution was passed. It demanded that 'the areas in which the Muslims are numerically in a majority, as in the North-Western and Eastern zones of India, should be grouped to constitute Independent States, in which the constituent units shall be autonomous and sovereign'. This was the first occasion on which a formal demand for partition was made by the Muslim League. As a counterblast the nationalist Muslims met in the Azad Muslim Conference in April at Delhi. They supported the Congress plan and condemned the demand for partition put forward by the Muslim League. But they could muster only feeble support.

Jinnah had been asking for an assurance that no constitutional changes would be made without the approval and the consent of the Muslims of India. He got this from the Secretary of State for India, who stated in Parliament on the 18th of April, 1940: 'I cannot believe that any Government or Parliament in this country would attempt to impose by force upon,

for example, eighty million Muslim subjects of His Majesty in India a form of Constitution under which they would not live peacefully and contentedly'.

After the Ramgarh session Dr. Rajendra Prasad took up the work of three committees on which he had been nominated by the Congress Ministry. As Chairman of the Bihar Labour Enquiry Committee he toured round the province and produced a report which was accepted by all the interests concerned. As the Congress ministry had gone out of office, this report was shelved by the Governor's regime. He was a member of the Education Enquiry Committee under the chairmanship of Prof. K. T. Shah and made valuable contributions, particularly with regard to university and primary education. He was also a member of the Hindustani Committee which was entrusted with the task of preparing a dictionary of technical and other words acceptable to Hindi and Urdu sections, a Hindi grammar and textbooks for higher classes. This committee did not submit its report till 1943 as its work was interrupted by his arrest in 1942.

From April, 1940, the war took a grave turn. Hitler launched his attacks on Norway, Denmark, Holland and Belgium. Later, France collapsed. In May Winston Churchill replaced Neville Chamberlain as Prime Minister and Mr. L. S. Amery became the Secretary of State for India. At this crisis the Congress made a renewed effort to participate in the prosecution of the war. The Working Committee met in Delhi early in July and offered full cooperation in the war activities if the political stalemate could be resolved. It asked Britain to agree to the goal of Indian independence and, as an immediate measure, to form a National Government composed of representatives of various parties at the Centre. It pointed out that this could be done without making any statutory changes. At this stage Gandhiji was not in favour of an undertaking to give active help in the prosecution of the war, as it would not be consistent with the Congress creed of non-violence. On the other hand, a majority of the members of the Working Committee argued that the ideal of non-violence applied only to the freedom struggle and to the solution of internal disputes. It did not apply to the eventuality of the aggression of a foreign power. Gandhiji did not agree with the Working Committee and severed

his connections with the Congress. Rajendra Prasad was also not prepared to compromise on the non-violence issue. Together with three other members of the Committee he tendered his resignation; but at the instance of the President, Moulana Azad, he withdrew his resignation pending the Viceroy's decision. Had there been a more imaginative person than Lord Linlithgow as Viceroy, the offer of full cooperation by the Congress would have been accepted. As Jawaharlal Nehru has bluntly pictured him:

‘Heavy of body and slow of mind, solid as a rock with almost a rock’s lack of awareness, possessing the qualities and failings of an old-fashioned aristocrat, he sought with integrity and honesty of purpose to find a way out of the tangle. But his limitations were too many; his mind worked in the old groove and shrank back from any innovation; his vision was limited by the traditions of the ruling class out of which he came; he saw and heard through the eyes and ears of the Civil Service and others who surrounded him; he distrusted people who talked of fundamental political and social changes; he disliked those who did not show a becoming appreciation of the high mission of the British Empire and its chief representative in India.’*

The Viceroy’s response on the 8th of August was to express his willingness to enlarge his Executive Council by taking more Indian representatives and by setting up a War Advisory Council. But he firmly declined to make any commitment regarding constitutional changes on the plea that these could be considered only after the termination of the war. Churchill’s hand was evident in this. The declaration pleased no political party. It rejected the Congress demand for complete independence and also the immediate demand for a National Government. The Muslim League failed to get an assurance of parity for its representatives with the non-Muslims on the Executive and that it would have a right of veto over later Congress participation in the Executive Council. In fact, the British Government was not yet convinced that the cooperation of the political parties would strengthen the war effort in India. Britain was getting what it wanted. There was no obstructive propaganda in the country, and the seven provinces under

* *The Discovery of India*, by J. Nehru, p. 528

the Governors' rule were giving all the assistance required.

The Working Committee met at Wardha on the 18th of August and decided to call an emergency meeting of the All-India Congress Committee. The Congress had been following a policy of refraining from any action that might embarrass the Government in its war activities. But Gandhiji felt that, if this attitude persisted, the Congress would become supine and die a slow death. He wrote to the Viceroy:

‘I do not at all mind the Congress wandering in the wilderness... But I must not be a helpless witness to the extinction of a great organisation which I have held under curb on the ground of refusal to embarrass His Majesty's Government at the present critical juncture. I must not have it said that for a false morality I allowed the Congress to be crushed without a struggle. It is this thought that is gnawing at me.’

On the 15th of September the All-India Congress Committee decided that ‘the Viceroy's offer was not worth looking at’, as stated by Moulana Azad. Gandhiji returned to the Congress fold. The Committee called upon the people to dissociate themselves from the war effort. A month later the Working Committee met again at Wardha in a mood of disappointment over Gandhiji's talks with the Viceroy. In search of a sanction to strengthen the Congress demand the Committee decided to start individual disobedience. This form of *satyagraha* appealed to Gandhiji because there was no chance of failure in it, provided there were sufficient number of persons willing to offer it. In mass civil disobedience good leadership is necessary as well as rigid discipline from all. The fall of one may adversely affect the rest. Individual disobedience carried no such risk. Vinoba Bhave, little known outside the inner circles, was selected to initiate it. He had acquired a reputation for his intellectual gifts and his life of austerity and renunciation. In drawing up the list of leaders who were to offer this form of *satyagraha* Rajendra Prasad, who was not enjoying good health, was exempted.

On the 17th of October Vinoba Bhave delivered a short anti-war speech and was sentenced to three months' imprisonment. Jawaharlal Nehru followed him and got four years' rigorous imprisonment. Within a year 30,000 men and women offered individual civil disobedience and went to jail. The Govern-

ment retaliated with repressive measures. Most of the members of the Working Committee and the All-India Congress Committee and ex-ministers of the provinces were imprisoned. On the 4th of December, 1941, the Government released all individual civil disobedience prisoners whose offences had been formal or symbolic in character. The individual *satyagraha* had little effect on the Government or the people. It did not strike the imagination of the people; owing to the Government control over the press, the issues could not be put to the people clearly. It failed therefore to raise much enthusiasm among the rank and file of the Congress.

By the middle of 1941 the fortunes of war had worsened for the Allies. Yugoslavia and Greece had fallen and Hitler had entered Russia. On the 21st of July the Viceroy's only gesture was to enlarge his Executive Council by adding five Indian members, who now numbered eight out of the total strength of twelve. On the 7th of December, 1941, the bombing of Pearl Harbour brought America and Japan into the war, which now threatened the frontiers of India. Singapore fell on the 15th of February and Rangoon on the 8th of March, 1942. India now assumed a strategic position in the war effort. Churchill felt that 'if the effective defence of India was to be organised it seemed to most of my colleagues important to make every effort to break the political deadlock'.* He sent Sir Stafford Cripps with new proposals for ending the stalemate. Cripps arrived on the 25th of March, 1942. England could not have selected a better envoy for this purpose. He was friendly with many of the Indian leaders, who credited him with sincerity of purpose, high intellectual attainments and sympathy for India's aspirations. He had talks with leaders of all parties. But his efforts were mainly to sell to them a cut-and-dried plan which he had brought with him. The negotiations lasted for two weeks. Rajendra Prasad, as member of the Working Committee, was summoned to Delhi. Nehru and Azad acted as spokesmen of the Congress with Cripps, but discussed the proposals every evening with members of the Working Committee. The Cripps Plan aimed at a compromise between the Congress demand for a Federal India and the Muslim League demand for a separate territory for the Muslims. It contained a pledge by the British Govern-

* *The Hinge of Fate* p. 214

ment to grant dominion status at the end of the war, and provided for a Constituent Assembly being established to frame the Constitution. As a concession to the Muslim League the Plan also gave to the provinces the right to contract out of the federation. As an immediate measure a few additional Indian representatives of the major political parties were to be nominated on the Executive Council of the Viceroy; but it was made painfully clear that the power would continue to rest with the Viceroy. All parties—including the Congress, the Muslim League and the moderates—rejected the Plan. Dr. Rajendra Prasad felt that the failure of the Cripps Mission was due largely to the lack of support of the Viceroy and the British Cabinet to the extent that Cripps needed it for reaching a satisfactory settlement. Cripps left India, a disappointed man, on the 11th of April.

CHAPTER XIII

1942

THE failure of the Cripps Mission gave India an acute sense of frustration at a time when Japan was drawing nearer to her frontiers. In January, 1941, Subhas Bose had slipped through the Calcutta police guard and had reached Berlin via Russia. His continuous broadcasts from Berlin, and later from Malaya on the Azad Hind Radio, continued to fan the exasperation of the people. In April, 1942, the A.I.C.C. felt that it was necessary to clarify the position of the Congress towards the war and called upon the people to resist any invasion, if it took place, by offering non-violent non-cooperation. Early in May, 1942, Gandhiji in the 'Harijan' called upon the British to withdraw from India as rulers of the country, and thus initiated the 'Quit India' campaign. This slogan struck the imagination of the people. On the 6th of July the Working Committee met at Wardha and decided that if India were granted freedom under a provisional government, India would use all her resources and would cooperate fully with the United Nations in the defence of India. Gandhiji had at last agreed to the use of force in resisting external aggression. A formal resolution passed at another meeting of the Working Committee on the 11th of July reiterated this and further explained that the Congress did not want to come in the way of the prosecution of the war and that it would have no objection to the retention of the Allied Forces in India for the purpose of defence. It gave a warning that if England did not agree to this proposal, the Congress would resort to mass *satyagraha*. There was no response to this from the British Government.

On the 7th of August the A.I.C.C. met in Bombay and passed the 'Quit India' resolution. It demanded the end of British rule in India by the immediate grant of freedom to India. It gave an assurance that the provisional government to be set up in accordance with its plan would defend India and resist aggression with all the armed as well as the non-violent forces at its command, in close alliance with the Allied Powers. If this demand were rejected the Committee would launch a mass struggle on non-violent lines under the leadership of Gandhiji.

This resolution was passed on the 8th of August. Early on the 9th of August Gandhiji and the members of the Working Committee were arrested. The same day Rajendra Prasad was taken into custody at Patna.

The arrest of the Congress leaders led to country-wide disturbances. Gandhiji had ended his address to the A.I.C.C. with the injunction—‘Do or die’. He had stated: ‘Here is the *mantra*, a short one, that I give you. You may imprint it on your hearts, and let every breath of yours give expression to it. The *mantra* is Do or Die. We shall either free India or die in the attempt; we shall not live to see the perpetuation of our slavery. Let that be your pledge’. When the leaders were arrested the people asked themselves what they were expected to do. Gandhiji had made this clear in his instruction to his secretary Pyarelal just before his arrest. He had said: ‘Let every non-violent soldier of freedom write out the slogan Do or Die on a piece of paper or cloth and stick it on his clothes, so that in case he died in the cause of offering *satyagraha*, he might be distinguished by that sign from the other elements which do not subscribe to non-violence’. This statement of his, however, did not get much publicity; word went round that the people were expected to show their resentment at the action of the Government.

But what concrete programme had the Congress contemplated? People were in the dark. Dr. Rajendra Prasad felt that the communiqué issued by the Government, and the Secretary of State’s speech the next day, had misled the people about the programme of the Congress. The communiqué alleged that the destruction of the means of communication, like posts, telegraphs and railways, formed part of the Congress programme. This was confirmed by the speech of the Secretary of State for India which was published in all newspapers. As the Congress had issued no programme these reports were accepted by the people. They argued that the only way to hit at the Government was by obstructing the war effort, and that communications offered the most vulnerable point of attack. Country-wide *hartals* and meetings were held and processions marched through the cities and towns demanding the release of the leaders. Rowdiness and sabotage were let loose. ‘The initial damage and destruction done by the violent mobs were

considerable. Official statements for this period give the following statistics: 250 railway stations damaged or destroyed; 550 post offices damaged; telegraph and telephone wires cut at 3,500 places; 70 police stations burned and 85 other government buildings destroyed. In addition the military casualties were 11 dead and 7 wounded, while the number of police killed was 31 and the total of those injured was described as very large.*

Rajendra Prasad was struck with the fact that violence was mainly aimed at the destruction of communications and government property. Except in a few cases the people refrained from attacking government officials. Had they so desired they could have worked havoc. But the people generally felt that it was against the principles of non-violence to kill or injure anyone. No such restriction applied to the destruction of property.

The Government retaliated with what amounted to a reign of terror. About 600 persons were killed during the first few days. In Delhi on the 11th and the 12th of August the police opened fire at 47 places. In Calcutta a serious demonstration began on the 13th of August. All protest meetings were inevitably attended by police firings and mass arrests. Chimur village in the Central Provinces was the scene of atrocities which shocked the whole of India. Four officials had been killed. Unheard-of reprisals were inflicted on the people by the police and the military. According to the Congress assessment sixty women were raped, a heavy collective fine was imposed and twenty persons were sentenced to death and twenty-six to life imprisonment. In Midnapore District two *tehsils* established a parallel government of the people, expelled all officials and maintained their independence for four months. An official estimate placed the casualties between the 9th of August and the 30th of November, 1942 at 1,028 killed and 3,215 seriously injured. Nine million rupees were extorted as collective fines, and about a hundred thousand persons were arrested and imprisoned. The Government justified its action on the plea that the movement was a violent and planned rebellion at the instigation of the Congress. This was certainly not borne out by what Gandhiji and Nehru had said at the A.I.C.C.

* *Jawaharlal Nehru*, by F. Moraes, p. 301

meeting. They intended to launch a civil disobedience movement if the final offer of cooperation were rejected, but there was no doubt that the agitation was to be non-violent. What happened was due to spontaneous combustion as the result of the acute frustration and exasperation of the people. It was given its direction by the misleading statement of the Government that disruption of communications and violent obstruction of war effort formed part of the programme of the Congress. The leaders of the Congress were all arrested, and its funds were confiscated. The members of the Working Committee who were in Bombay were lodged in the Ahmednagar Fort.

Dr. Rajendra Prasad had been ill and was so weak that he had not attended the meeting of the A.I.C.C. at Bombay. He was, however, anxious to lay down some definite programme for the people to follow in case the leaders were arrested. He drafted the programme on the lines of non-violent action in earlier campaigns. It was sent for printing but its issue was delayed pending news from Bombay, as it was expected that Gandhiji would not start mass action until he had seen the Viceroy. On the 9th of August the District Magistrate brought the Civil Surgeon to examine Rajendra Prasad and give his opinion whether he could be moved to a far-off place. The Civil Surgeon examined him and said that he was not fit to undertake a journey. He was therefore taken to the Bankipore jail. A large procession marched to the Secretariat to protest against the arrest. The police opened fire, killing nine and injuring several more. The cutting of telephone and telegraph wires had started. The jails were filled to capacity, and some of the regular criminals were released to make room for political prisoners. The crowds even attacked the jail and released some of the political prisoners who were being transported to another jail. Owing to lack of accommodation in the jail the A class prisoners, among whom was Rajendra Prasad, were kept in the hospital. A room had been kept for Rajendra Prasad in the Ahmednagar Fort where other members of the Working Committee had been lodged; but owing to his poor health and the breakdown of the railways he was never shifted there. Before his arrest Rajendra Prasad was under the treatment of an *ayurvedic* physician, but as he did not like to ask for any favour while in jail he submitted himself to the

allopathic treatment provided by the jail hospital. He says: 'Prison life is bound to be irksome in so far as one is deprived of his freedom. But I could say that I did not, after all, have a bad time in Bankipore jail. I adjusted myself to the surroundings. I began devoting my time to spinning, reading and writing. My health of course was not good, although I was not always confined to bed'.*

On the 9th of February, 1943, Gandhiji undertook a fast of twenty-one days—'according to capacity'. Although there were certain critical days Gandhiji survived the ordeal. Rajendra Prasad passed a very anxious time and got the permission of the jail authorities to receive daily telegrams from Poona regarding Gandhiji's health. But these telegrams were so much delayed in censorship that they lost their value to him.

While in jail Dr. Rajendra Prasad helped several prisoners. He drafted a petition for mercy for a prisoner sentenced to death. The Governor accepted the petition and commuted the sentence to one of imprisonment. Another person who had been sentenced to seven years' imprisonment for conspiracy to commit a dacoity came to ask him to draft an appeal. The allegation was that he had taken an active part in the robbery and had even run a mile with a rice bag on his back. Actually the man was aged sixty and was lame and could only walk with difficulty. Dr. Rajendra Prasad drafted the appeal which secured his acquittal in the High Court.

The Jail Committee on one of its visits asked Rajendra Prasad if he would like to be released. His firm reply was: 'Not unless and until all the others are released'. In 1944 malaria broke out in Bihar in an epidemic form. The proper care and treatment of patients had to be organised on a mass scale. The 'Indian Nation' of Patna in its editorials pressed the Government to release Rajendra Prasad for organising relief work in a proper manner. The public supported the demand. On hearing of this Rajendra Prasad objected to the move. He had no desire for release as long as the political demands had not been granted and his companions had not been released. He immediately wrote to the Government dissociating himself from the move made by the public and stated definitely that

he was not willing to be released. He felt that the relief work could well be handled by others.

In 1943 he read about the piteous condition of the people of Bengal stricken with famine which was due to the wilfulness, haughtiness and gross negligence of the Government. It gave him a terrible shock. The papers reported the deaths from starvation and the heaps of corpses in the streets of Calcutta. Photographs and gruesome details gave vivid pictures of the horrible situation. He continued reading the papers until he could bear it no more and had to discontinue them. He was angry because he was helpless, though not entirely so. He appealed to the people of Bihar to spare foodgrains from their harvests for the people of Bengal. But the appeal was withheld by the Government.

While in jail he kept pondering over the Hindu-Muslim problem. If only unity could be achieved, India would have a quick and smooth passage to freedom. The Muslims had set their heart on Pakistan. He therefore decided to examine the whole problem and write a book on the subject. The book was started in jail but only completed, after his release, in 1946. It proved an immediate success. The first edition was sold out in two months. In the book he refuted the two-nation theory and argued that logically a separate state of Pakistan would not be in the interest of the Muslims of India. It would only benefit limited areas.

He also continued writing his autobiography which he had started two years earlier. He wondered if it would be of any use to anybody. 'I was not sure if there was anything which others could learn from me or my life's account. I had no doubt dedicated myself to public work, particularly Congress work. Perhaps my autobiography could be a source of information regarding our political struggle. But, sure enough, it could not be of any historical value. . . . I had no source of reference with me except my own memory. These reflections sometimes made me doubt the utility of my effort, which I thought might be looked upon as sheer egoism. Nevertheless, having started it, I thought it best to finish it, without bothering about its publication.*' He completed the autobiography at Pilani after his release. His friends who read the

* *Autobiography* p. 568

manuscript persuaded him to publish it, particularly as it was in Hindi. It has proved to be an outstanding book, popular with the public. It presents the panorama of political development of India from the beginning of the national movement up to 1946. Written in a lucid and simple style, such as would appeal to the common man, it portrays the thoughts of a great patriot endeavouring to find a way of serving the country through many ups and downs. As he was in the inner councils of the Congress he had a unique opportunity of seeing the struggle from behind the scenes. It is a valuable document of the struggle for freedom. In 1954 the *Nagari Pracharni Sabha* of Benares awarded it a prize as the best autobiography in Hindi.

CHAPTER XIV

THE CABINET MISSION PLAN

WHILE in jail Rajendra Prasad was shocked to hear of the death of Kasturba Gandhi. He recollected how he had met her for the first time in 1917 when she came to Champaran with Gandhiji: 'Fifteen of us were staying in a house and had engaged a cook to prepare our meals. When she arrived Gandhiji asked us to dispense with the cook. We thought it odd that she should cook for all of us. She looked so weak and frail. Gandhiji would not listen to us and asked us not to bother about her appearance, assuring us that she was used to doing hard work. She took over the work, doing it with facility and treating us with motherly affection'.*

After her death Gandhiji's health declined owing to anaemia and low blood-pressure, and on the 5th of May, 1944, he was released on medical grounds. Soon after, Rajendra Prasad heard about his offer to meet the Viceroy, which was curtly rejected; and then came the news of the talks between Gandhiji and Jinnah which began on the 9th of September at Jinnah's house in Bombay and lasted for eighteen days.

Jinnah had made good use of the opportunity given to him when the Congress had gone into isolation. In the 1937 elections the Muslim League got only five per cent of the Muslim votes. Jinnah had realised that the League had made no headway with the people and felt that he must widen its appeal and strengthen its hold over the masses. A virulent propaganda was launched. As an astute lawyer his tactics were to harp upon the weaknesses of the opponent's case. He raised the cry of 'Islam in danger' and carried on a powerful campaign against the Congress, stigmatising it as a purely Hindu organisation. He cited for this purpose such instances as the *Bande Matram* song (the Congress National Song), the *Vidya Mandir* scheme (Schools were called Temples of Learning) introduced by the Congress ministries and the bias in favour of Hindi at the cost of Urdu. The resignations of the Congress ministries had given him a chance to bring all the Muslim splinter parties within the fold of the Muslim League. The Muslims became loyal sup-

* *Autobiography* p. 562

porters of the Government in the war effort and basked in the sunshine of official favour. Taking advantage of the absence of the Congress members of the Assemblies, the Muslim League manoeuvred to form the ministries in Assam, Sind and the Frontier Province. During the talks with Gandhiji Jinnah was therefore in a favourable position—arguing not from weakness but from strength. Dr. Rajendra Prasad was reminded of his own talks in 1934 when Jinnah had insisted that the Congress should speak only on behalf of the Hindus. History repeated itself and, as Gandhiji said, the talks merely ran on parallel lines and never came closer. Gandhiji refuted the claim of the Muslims to being a separate nation, while Jinnah maintained that by all the canons of international law the Muslims were a separate nation.

From June, 1944, the war took a favourable turn. The Allies occupied Normandy and advanced through Western Europe and the Russians marched through the Balkans. Germany collapsed, and on the 7th of May 1945 the war in Europe was over. But it was still necessary to win over India's cooperation in the war against Japan which was coming closer to India's frontiers. The British Government made an attempt at solving the political deadlock. On the 5th of June, 1945, Lord Wavell announced that the future constitution of India would have to be framed by the Indians themselves; but as an immediate measure he was prepared to reconstitute his Executive Council so that all the members except the Viceroy and the Commander-in-Chief would be selected from Indian political leaders, half from the Muslims and half from the caste Hindus. On the 14th of June the political prisoners were released, and Wavell's offer was considered at a conference called by him on the 25th of June at Simla. Rajendra Prasad as a member of the Working Committee was also summoned to Simla. Riding the high horse, Jinnah declined to agree to any Muslims being included in the Executive Council unless they were approved by the Muslim League. Wavell had intended to include a Unionist and a Congress Muslim but felt nervous of annoying the Muslim League. On the 14th of July he announced that the conference had broken down. Rajendra Prasad heaved a sigh of relief. Much against his will his name had been included in the Congress list. He felt that as the war was still on he would not like

to be actively associated with the Government; it was only at Gandhiji's insistence that he had agreed to waive the objection.

Political events in England now took a decisive turn for India when the Labour Party came into power in July, 1945. It was anxious to resolve the political deadlock in India. When Japan surrendered on the 14th of August, 1945, Prime Minister Attlee felt that the time had come to restore normal conditions in India. On the 19th of September he announced that a constitution-making body consisting of the representatives of the people would soon be set up and that the elections to the central and provincial legislatures would be held and the Executive Council reconstituted. India now became busy with preparations for the elections.

At this juncture two outstanding events showed how British prestige had suffered in India. In November, 1945, three ex-officers of the Indian Army—a Hindu, a Sikh and a Muslim—were tried in the historic Red Fort in Delhi for waging war against the King. They were officers of the Indian National Army formed out of the Indians taken as prisoners-of-war in Malaya. Out of 60,000 prisoners, one-third had joined the I.N.A. under the leadership of Subash Bose who, on the 21st of October, 1943, had proclaimed a provisional Government of India with himself as the Head of the State. Its declared object was to liberate India from the rule of the British. The trial aroused the sympathy of the people, who felt that most of the men had joined the Indian National Army out of patriotic fervour. A strong Committee of Defence was constituted by all parties to help the prisoners. Jawaharlal Nehru voiced the opinion of the people when he pleaded for generous treatment of these prisoners on the ground that, whatever their failings and misgivings, their dominating motive was love for India's freedom. Bhulabhai Desai, a renowned lawyer, put up a very able defence for the prisoners. The Government argued that the officers had broken their oath of allegiance to the British Crown. Bhulabhai Desai retorted: 'Unless you sell your own soul, how can you ever say, when you are fighting to liberate your own country, that there is some other allegiance which prevents you from doing so? If that were so, there would be nothing but permanent slavery'. The accused were convicted, but, owing to the force of public opinion, they were released

immediately by the order of the Commander-in-Chief. The trial was a great triumph for the united will of the people against the Government.

Close on the heels of the I.N.A. trial came the mutiny in Bombay of 3,000 ratings of the Royal Indian Navy. They protested against differential treatment in food and living conditions between them and the British personnel. The naval establishments in Calcutta, Madras, Delhi, Karachi and Cochin were also affected. On the 21st of November the situation became explosive as 1,000 men in the Royal Indian Air Force camps came out on a sympathetic strike. The mutineers gained control of twenty ships in Bombay and threatened to fire on the city. Sardar Patel appealed for a peaceful settlement, and he advised them to surrender. This took place on the 23rd of November. But there were public demonstrations of sympathy with the ratings in Calcutta, Karachi, Madras and Bombay. In Bombay the demonstrations became violent and the police opened fire, killing 187 and causing injuries to over a thousand persons. The sympathy of the public was with the naval ratings and this startled the British Government.

The January, 1946, elections to the central and provincial legislatures revealed to what extent the Muslim League had consolidated its position. It won all the thirty Muslim seats in the Central Assembly and 427 out of the 507 Muslim seats in the provinces. The Congress won fifty-six seats in the Central Assembly, constituting ninety-one per cent of the general seats, and 930 seats in the provinces. The question arose as to whether the Congress should take office. The war was over and there was no ground for keeping out. Most of the Congressmen were in favour of accepting office, and consequently in eight provinces where Congress had clear majorities Congress ministries were formed. Of the remaining three provinces, the Punjab formed a coalition ministry composed of Unionists, Congress and Sikh members. In Sind and Bengal the Muslim League formed ministries with the help of Europeans.

In January a parliamentary delegation had toured India. It found the situation in the country explosive and full of strong anti-British feeling. On its return it met the British Prime Minister and urged the necessity of taking early action to resolve the political deadlock. The Prime Minister decided to send a

Cabinet Mission composed of Lord Pethick-Lawrence, Secretary of State for India, Sir Stafford Cripps and Mr. A. V. Alexander. The Mission arrived in India on the 23rd of March, 1946, and met the leaders of all parties in an endeavour to reach an agreement between them. But in this it was not successful, and so it announced its own Plan on the 16th of May.

The Plan provided for a Constituent Assembly elected by the members of the provincial legislatures. It ruled out the formation of Pakistan and proposed a Union Government, composed of the representatives of the provinces and the Indian states, dealing with foreign affairs, defence and communications. The provinces were to be invested with residuary powers. It proposed a three-tier structure of Government consisting of the Union, groups of provinces, and provinces. The provinces were to be given the right of secession from the Union. Pending the finalisation of a new Constitution, an interim Government would be set up consisting of the representatives of the major parties.

Rajendra Prasad felt that the Plan tried to please all the parties. It had ruled out Pakistan, but had provided for a group-wise division of India, and had given limited powers to the Union Government. The provinces of the Punjab, Bengal and Assam had been placed in the groups which were likely to secede from the Union. No wonder that the Muslim League accepted the Plan on the 6th of June, for it saw in the Plan the seeds of Pakistan in the grouping of the provinces. On the other hand, the Congress Working Committee insisted that the provinces should have the freedom of secession even while the Constitution was being framed and not only after it had been framed. The N.W.F. Province and Assam were initially opposed to the proposed grouping. With regard to the formation of the Interim Cabinet the Congress could also not agree to the Muslim League monopoly of nomination of Muslim members. On the 16th of June the Viceroy announced fourteen nominees on the Interim Cabinet with five representatives each from the Congress and the League. The Congress representatives were Nehru, Patel, Rajendra Prasad, Rajagopalachari and Mehtab. The Congress declined the invitation to form the Government, and on the 26th of June the Cabinet Mission announced that its Plan had failed, and the Viceroy

formed a caretaker Government composed of some officials.

The Muslim League felt piqued and sullen at this turn of events, as it had been led to believe that even if the Congress declined to join the Interim Cabinet the Government would be formed with the help of the Muslim League. The elections to the Constituent Assembly also gave the Congress an overwhelming majority. The day after the publication of the election results the League withdrew its acceptance of the Plan both with regard to the Interim Government as well as the Constituent Assembly. Jinnah further declared that constitutional methods would now be discarded by the League and called for 'direct action' to begin on the 16th of August. He said: 'Why do you expect me to sit with folded hands? I also am going to make trouble'. Following his leader, Feroze Khan Noon had boasted that the League would create a situation which would make people forget the massacres of Chengiz Khan and Halaku Khan. It kept its word and the Calcutta blood-bath started on the 16th of August, which had been declared a public holiday by the Muslim League Ministry. 'This was perhaps the bloodiest carnage witnessed in India since the sacking of Delhi by Nadir Shah, although I am not sure that his armies could have massacred so many people.'* The barbaric fury let loose, and connived at by the League Ministry, took toll of over four thousand killed and thousands injured. The gutters of Calcutta ran with blood. Property worth *crores* was destroyed by arson and pillage.

The fury spread to Noakhali district which had a Muslim majority. 'Muslim gangs went on the rampage, killing, looting, converting Hindus by force and destroying Hindu temples and property indiscriminately.' From there the trouble spread to Bihar where the firm handling by the Congress ministry brought the situation under control. Gandhiji went to Noakhali and his one-man mission succeeded, where the army and the police had failed, in restoring peaceful co-existence.

The situation in the country was taking a grave turn. Communal tension had reached a high pitch. The Viceroy felt that a representative Government was urgently needed. He therefore called upon Nehru to form the Government in consultation with Jinnah. Nehru failed to get the cooperation of the Muslim League and submitted his list of twelve members..

* *Autobiography* p. 590

The selection was made by the Parliamentary Committee consisting of Nehru, Patel, Rajendra Prasad and Moulana Azad. This list was accepted by the Viceroy and the Interim Government with Nehru as Vice-President took office on the 2nd of September, 1946. Rajendra Prasad was allotted the portfolio of Food and Agriculture which was 'a job after my own heart, though there was an acute shortage of food and I knew that it was not easy to solve that problem'.*

The Viceroy felt that there should be a coalition at the Centre between the Congress and the Muslim League and made efforts to bring about a settlement between Nehru and Jinnah. The Muslim League realised that the Congress had secured a point of vantage and decided to exercise its right of nominating five representatives of the Muslim League in the Interim Government. They took office on the 26th of October. But Jinnah made no commitment either to withdraw the 'direct action' or to participate in the proceedings of the Constituent Assembly.

The entry of the Muslim League into the Government did not ease the communal tension. It became clear that these members had joined the Interim Government with the object of sabotaging it from within. Jinnah continued saying that India's troubles would not be over until Pakistan was achieved, and tried to undermine the working of the Constituent Assembly. The Muslim League ministers functioned as a separate group within the Cabinet, obstructing the work of others. The Congress pressed for the resignation of the League members from the Interim Government on the ground that they declined to participate in the Constituent Assembly and continued their incitement and support of their 'direct action' programme.

Unable to solve the deadlock, on the 20th of February, 1947, Prime Minister Attlee announced that power would be transferred to responsible Indian hands by a date not later than June, 1948. If the Constituent Assembly could not draft a Constitution, Government 'will have to consider to whom the powers of the Central Government of British India should be handed over, on the due date, whether as a whole to some form of Central Government for British India or in some areas to the existing Provincial Governments, or in such other way as may seem most reasonable and in the best interests of the Indian

* *Autobiography* p. 592

people'. Churchill described this as a 'shameful flight, a premature hurried scuttle'. Sir Stafford Cripps explained that the Congress demand for the expulsion of the League ministers would have kept the League out of the Constituent Assembly. To dismiss the Constituent Assembly would have made it an illegal and revolutionary body. The object of Attlee's statement, he declared, was to bring about a reconciliation between the major parties in India by shock treatment.

On the 23rd of March, 1947, Lord Mountbatten took over from Lord Wavell as Viceroy. At this time 'the general situation was bleak, as though the country was heading for disaster. With the Muslim League conducting a civil disobedience campaign against two provincial ministries, and its representatives in the Central Government openly preaching direct action, Hindu-Muslim differences were further accentuated. Even some members of the Services, at least at the upper levels, had given up their traditional loyalty and impartiality and began openly to take sides in the political controversy. The precarious food position, the steadily deteriorating economic position, and widespread labour unrest added to the threatening symptoms of a general collapse'.* Mountbatten brought a fresh mind, personal charm, tremendous energy and a habit of quick decision to his office. He had to find a solution by June, 1948. His instructions were to devise a unitary Government for British India and the Indian states by agreement between both the parties. If by the 1st of October, 1947, he found this was not possible, he was to report what steps should be taken. He lost little time in arriving at quick decisions. He had long discussions with the leaders and felt that the stage for transfer of power must be prepared immediately, otherwise the situation would deteriorate, leading to chaos and civil war. He first toyed with the idea of making the provinces and groups independent successor states, but soon gave it up for transfer of power to two Central Governments on the basis of dominion status. It was felt that acceptance of dominion status by the Congress would facilitate recognition of India as the rightful successor to the British Government and give it a place in the Commonwealth.

Opinion within the country had been veering round to the possibility of a partition. In a public speech on the 20th of

* *Transfer of Power*, by V. P. Menon, p. 349

April Nehru declared: 'The Muslim League can have Pakistan, if they do not take away other parts of India which do not wish to join Pakistan'. On the 28th of April Rajendra Prasad as President stated in the Constituent Assembly:

'While we have accepted the Cabinet Mission's statement of the 16th of May, 1946, which contemplated a Union of the different provinces and states within the country, it may be that the Union may not comprise all provinces. If that unfortunately comes to pass, we shall have to be content with a constitution for a part of it. In that case, we can and should insist that one principle will apply to all parts of the country and no constitution will be forced upon any unwilling part of it. This may mean the division of some provinces. For this we must be prepared and the Assembly may have to draw up a constitution based on such division.'

By the middle of May Mountbatten put his draft proposals to the leaders of the parties and then got the approval of the British Government. On the 3rd of June, 1947, the Viceroy announced his plan which had been informally accepted by the leaders of the parties. The same evening Jawaharlal Nehru commended to the people the acceptance of the plan. He explained that they did not desire the vivisection of India but they could not let India suffer indefinitely. Under the circumstances a surgical operation was necessary. Sardar Patel advised the nation to accept the partition as being inevitable. He argued that it was best to remove an infected limb lest the entire body should suffer. Gandhiji at his prayer meeting of the 4th of June stated: 'The vast majority of Congressmen did not want unwilling partners. Their motto was non-violence and therefore not coercion. Hence after carefully weighing the pros and cons of the vital issues at stake, they had reluctantly agreed to the secession from the Union, that was being framed of those parts which had boycotted the Constituent Assembly'.* At the A.I.C.C. meeting on the 14th and 15th of June opinion was divided. Pandit Pant moved the resolution accepting the partition plan. He rightly emphasised that it was better than the Cabinet Mission Plan which did not rule out partition but gave an opening to the groups of provinces to opt out of the Union. Moulana Azad supported the resolution on

* *Mahatma Gandhi*, by G. D. Tendulkar, Vol. VIII, p. 5

the ground that a settlement must be reached to make the British quit India at the earliest moment. He, however, held the view that the Cabinet Mission Plan was better than the partition proposal. Gandhiji commended the acceptance of the resolution of the Working Committee on the ground that the Congress leaders had committed themselves to the partition plan and the A.I.C.C. should endorse the decision of the Working Committee, which consisted of men of wisdom and leadership. The resolution was passed by 153 members in favour and twenty-nine against.*

Dr. Rajendra Prasad felt that the partition was the logical outcome of the course of events preceding it. The British Government had announced that power would be transferred to responsible Indian hands by a date not later than June, 1948. This was its answer to the demand to quit India. The Cabinet Mission Plan was found to be impracticable and cumbersome. The experience of the working of the Interim Government had been disastrous. It had shown that there was no possibility of evolving a common approach between the Congress and the League. The League bloc exercised a virtual veto in the Cabinet and held up all development plans. The administration suffered, and even the loyalty of the Services to the Government as a whole was adversely affected. Communal tension had reached such a pitch that unless a solution was found India might suffer from the ravages of a civil war. Rajendra Prasad felt that even coercion could only secure an artificial and enforced unity which would not give India the correct atmosphere for progress and development. He was therefore convinced that the force of circumstances had made partition inevitable as the only alternative to civil strife and chaos.

Together with Sardar Patel Rajendra Prasad served on the Partition Council under the Chairmanship of Mountbatten. Jinnah and Liaquat Ali Khan represented the other side. Dr. Rajendra Prasad's legal training enabled him to secure a just and fair settlement of the assets and liabilities and the problems affecting Central revenues, currency and coinage,

*The official records of the A.I.C.C. support these facts rather than the version given by Moulana Azad in his autobiography, *India Wins Freedom* (p. 198).

economic relations and the armed forces. The Council was assisted by committees of officials and all decisions were reached by mutual agreement.

The culmination came with the Indian Independence Act which provided for the creation of two separate Dominions from the 15th of August, 1947. The Indian states could accede to either Dominion or assume independent status. Jawaharlal Nehru warned the states that geographical, historical and other factors fixed inherent paramountcy which could not be denied with impunity, and that the Congress would not permit any princely state to live in isolation from the rest. The Viceroy urged the states to accede to either of the two Dominions. By the time that Independence came, all the princely states had acceded with the exception of Hyderabad, Junagadh and Kashmir. The ease and rapidity with which the integration of the states was effected was due largely to the firm and sympathetic handling of the princes by Sardar Patel, who was a master of the art of dealing with men of diverse views. The people feared him, but also respected, admired and loved him for his clear decisions, cool courage and his spirit of justice which never wavered.

CHAPTER XV

MINISTER FOR FOOD AND AGRICULTURE

IN the Interim Ministry, which was formed on the 2nd of September, 1946, Rajendra Prasad was allotted the portfolio of Food and Agriculture. Among all his colleagues he was the one best fitted to handle these difficult departments. Born and bred on the soil, he was closest to the farmers and understood their difficulties and their hopes and fears. Naturally he was happy at this assignment, for the welfare of the peasants, who formed the backbone of the country, was dearest to his heart.

He was also aware that it would require all his ingenuity and patience, for India was facing a crisis on the food front. There was not enough food in the country for the growing population; production had not kept pace with the rising demand. The dietary habits of the people needed large supplies of cereals, and continuous bad harvests combined with the difficulty of obtaining supplies from other countries had compelled the Government to embark upon extensive controls over production, movement and distribution of foodgrains. The Government bought all the grain from the farms having a surplus and distributed it to cities, towns and deficit rural areas. Rationing of foodgrains had been introduced and 143,000,000 people—four out of every ten—had to obtain their meagre ration of twelve ounces per head from the Government shops. The Government had undertaken the responsibility of keeping the ration shops well-stocked. But its reserves were negligible, and it became a hand-to-mouth operation—rushing supplies from the farms to the ration shops.

This acute situation had developed ever since the supplies of rice from Burma had stopped. With the fall of Rangoon, India suddenly woke up to the consciousness that in spite of its vast resources of land and water the country did not grow enough to feed its people. India had consistently depended upon the annual import of about two million tons of rice from Burma. These imports had presented no problem, for they were the return on Indian investments in Burma. But when they ceased India found herself in a tight corner. Her efforts to import food from other countries met with little success, for, owing to

the devastation caused by the war, there was a global shortage of foodgrains. The position took a grave turn when in 1945 the harvests of rice and wheat showed a decline of five million tons. A similar blight affected the crop the next year. With difficulty 1·75 million tons in 1945 and 2·6 million tons in 1946 had been imported. These approximated to India's normal pre-war imports, but could not make up the shortage due to bad seasons. The farmers had also exhausted their private reserves owing to successive bad seasons. Consequently, the food controls were operating in an atmosphere of fear as to whether there would be enough to go round. Rajendra Prasad found that a frank admission by the Government that there was a shortage of food had immediately resulted in the stocks going underground and the black market prices becoming double.

The situation had gradually deteriorated from the beginning of the war. The Government had shown an astounding lack of vision and foresight in failing to assess the effect of the war on the food front. There was some justification for inaction in the earlier stages when it was not anticipated that Japan would join the Axis powers or that the normal supply of rice from Burma would be cut off. But even after the onslaught on Pearl Harbour the Government did not realise the gravity of the situation; the laissez-faire attitude still lingered. The policy of the Government was to trust to improvisation as each development took place, and even the execution of its orders was feeble. Its main concern was to check the rise in prices of foodgrains which was leading to social discontent and raising the cost of supplies to the army. A series of All-India Conferences was held by the Commerce Ministry in Delhi in order to get the cooperation of the provinces in curbing the rise in prices. At these conferences the surplus provinces resisted the imposition of control over prices of foodgrains on the ground that during the period of depression the Government of India had taken little action—and that also too late—to prevent the prices from going below the cost of production in this country. They argued: 'On what pretext can you now deprive the farmers of a rise in prices?' However, compromises were reached, and the maximum prices were fixed and revised from time to time. The Government naïvely believed that the prices could be controlled merely by legislation. The experience of England

and other countries would have revealed the pitfalls in such a scheme. But with a sublime faith in its own powers it continued its policy of controlling prices by issuing notifications under the Act. As there was a basic shortage of foodgrains, the supplies went underground; the maximum prices became a dead letter and black markets in foodgrains flourished.

After the fall of Burma in March, 1942, the situation had become critical. The prices kept soaring and the visible stocks in the grain shops kept shrinking. Grain shops were looted, and the long queues of people outside the shops were a warning to the Government. The provincial governments, especially in the deficit areas, could not handle the situation and appealed to the Central Government for help. They also pointed out that any further deterioration in the food situation would affect the war effort. The Government of India felt that, despite provincial autonomy, it must intervene and secure co-ordination between the provinces and the princely states—the only way of enforcing equitable distribution of foodgrains throughout the country. To implement this policy it created at the Centre a separate Department of Food in November, 1942. The Food Ministers of the provinces and the major states were summoned to Delhi in order to enlist their cooperation in making a food plan for the whole of India and in executing it.

In the initial stages the cooperation of the provinces was half-hearted and grudging. Traditionally they had looked upon Food and Agriculture as being exclusively within their own jurisdiction, as expressly provided in the 1935 Act. The deficit areas appreciated the lead of the Government of India, but the surplus areas considered it an interference. They even tried to mislead the Centre as regards their crops and their surpluses. In one surplus province the report of a 'good crop' was altered by the Governor's adviser to 'below normal crop', because, as he said, 'We don't want Delhi to bother us to send more grain'.

The Government of India had been feeling its way in the initial stages and trying to take the provinces with it. But it lacked firmness and determination. It let Bengal loose by allowing free trade in grains. The result was the disastrous famine of 1943 which claimed a toll of 3½ million lives. It was entirely man-made and could have been avoided by care and foresight.

The Enquiry Commission ascribed it to the apathy and negligence of the Central and the State Governments. Private greed made hay in the sunshine of corruption and negligence. The whole country was shocked at this wanton and callous indifference, and the Central Government was forced to take greater responsibility. It stiffened its attitude to the provinces, and there were occasions when directives under the Defence of India Act had to be issued to compel the provinces to fall into line with the all-India policy.

It became apparent that price control could never be effective without physical control over the supplies of foodgrains from the point of their procurement in the field, through their movements and their ultimate distribution to the consumers. The purchase of foodgrains in the market was not enough. The provinces and the states were asked to acquire all surplus stocks from the farmers as well as the dealers.

In view of the overall shortage the Government aimed at securing an equitable distribution of foodgrains throughout the country. But this could not be achieved by dictatorial orders, as not only the provincial governments but the princely states, which enjoyed a measure of independence, were involved. The only feasible course was to secure the consent of all parties to this arrangement by persuasion. The Central Government, therefore, brought the representatives of the provincial and the major state governments round the table to assess what the surpluses or deficits in each area were. Having made this estimate, it then made arrangements for the surpluses to be placed at the disposal of the Central Government to be sent to the deficit areas. A basic plan of procurement and distribution of foodgrains was formulated by the Government of India at the end of each crop season, and this had to be adjusted every month. Theoretically the intention was that thereby fair shares for all would be secured. But while the policy received the lip support of the surplus provinces, in actual practice they were reluctant to declare the real food surpluses in order to avoid compulsory procurement of all surplus stocks from the farmers. The task of the Government of India was, therefore, to persuade the surplus areas to give to the common pool the maximum quantity that they could get from the farmers, and to distribute whatever was available to the

deficit areas, supplementing it with imports from abroad.

Consequently, towards the end of 1946 when Dr. Rajendra Prasad assumed control of the Food Ministry, there was in operation an elaborate food structure in the country in respect of internal procurement of surpluses, imports from abroad, movement of grains, and rationing and controlled distribution of foodgrains in 887 cities, towns and rural areas.

Dr. Rajendra Prasad realised that India could not rely entirely upon making up the deficit by means of imports. He therefore appealed to the producers to grow more food and to the consumers to use food wisely and not to waste it. He also did his best to get as much food as possible from abroad. He got wheat and maize from America and persuaded Herbert Hoover, former President of the U.S., and also the American Official Delegation to give India a larger quantity of wheat. But the U.S.A. had to cater not only for India but for all the countries affected by the war where agriculture had been seriously disrupted. Consequently the maximum India could get by way of imports was about $1\frac{1}{2}$ million tons.

However, the people were getting uneasy. A feeling was growing that the controls were barring the way to achieving self-sufficiency in food. Some people argued that the fixed prices gave little incentive to the farmer to produce more. The consumer also suffered under the controls; he had to put up with poor-quality foodgrains supplied by ration shops managed by the Government officials, who made money in devious ways. Others enquired: 'How long would the Government continue to shoulder the heavy responsibility of supplying foodgrains to large numbers of people?' It was argued that if the controls were withdrawn the concealed reserves would come out and the people would get all they required at competitive prices. In his post-prayer speech on the 17th of October Gandhiji referred to his opinion expressed 'some time ago, that the control over food and cloth should be removed, without further delay. War was over and yet the prices were going up. There was food in the country and cloth too. Yet it did not reach the people. It was, indeed, a sad state of affairs. The Government was trying to spoon-feed the people. Instead of that, the people should be thrown on their own resources.... The people should be allowed to be self-reliant. Supposing that the worst

fears were realised, there was nothing to prevent them from reverting to controls. Personally he believed that it would gradually ease the situation. People would begin to exert themselves to solve their problems and have little time to quarrel among themselves'.* Dr. Rajendra Prasad felt that these opinions should be considered carefully, and appointed a committee of officials and non-officials presided over by Sir Purshottamdas Thakurdas—a leading business man—to examine the position and advise the Government on its food policy. The committee submitted its report in December, 1947, suggesting progressive decontrol of foodgrains and a gradual reduction in the rationing commitment undertaken by the Government. It recommended greater reliance being placed on internal purchases, and urged that production should be stimulated by the grant of a bonus on extra surpluses supplied by the provinces. It was hoped that the revival of free trade would bring out hidden stocks. The experiment was tried by the Government in certain areas. But the anticipations of the committee were not fulfilled. Owing to the absence of any reserve stocks with the farmers and with the Government, the inflationary pressure on prices could not be kept under check. The Government also tried the experiment of setting up fair-price shops for the supply of grains to low-income groups, but this led to increased demands on the Central Government and these could only be satisfied by larger imports. It became clear that in the atmosphere of a definite shortage decontrol could never be effective unless the Government had sufficient buffer stocks which it could release in such a manner as to keep the prices down and induce the private stockists to bring out their hoards. The Government stocks were very low, and the traders took advantage of the decontrol to push up the prices by twenty-five to fifty per cent. The vulnerable sections of the population were badly hit by this, and the Government decided to reinforce controls where they had been relaxed.

Dr. Rajendra Prasad was in charge of these departments for little more than a year only. However, he surveyed the situation carefully and felt that the long-term solution of the food problem lay in increasing production by revitalising agriculture, which had suffered from serious neglect for centuries.

* *Mahatma Gandhi*, by G. D. Tendulkar, Vol. VIII, p. 188

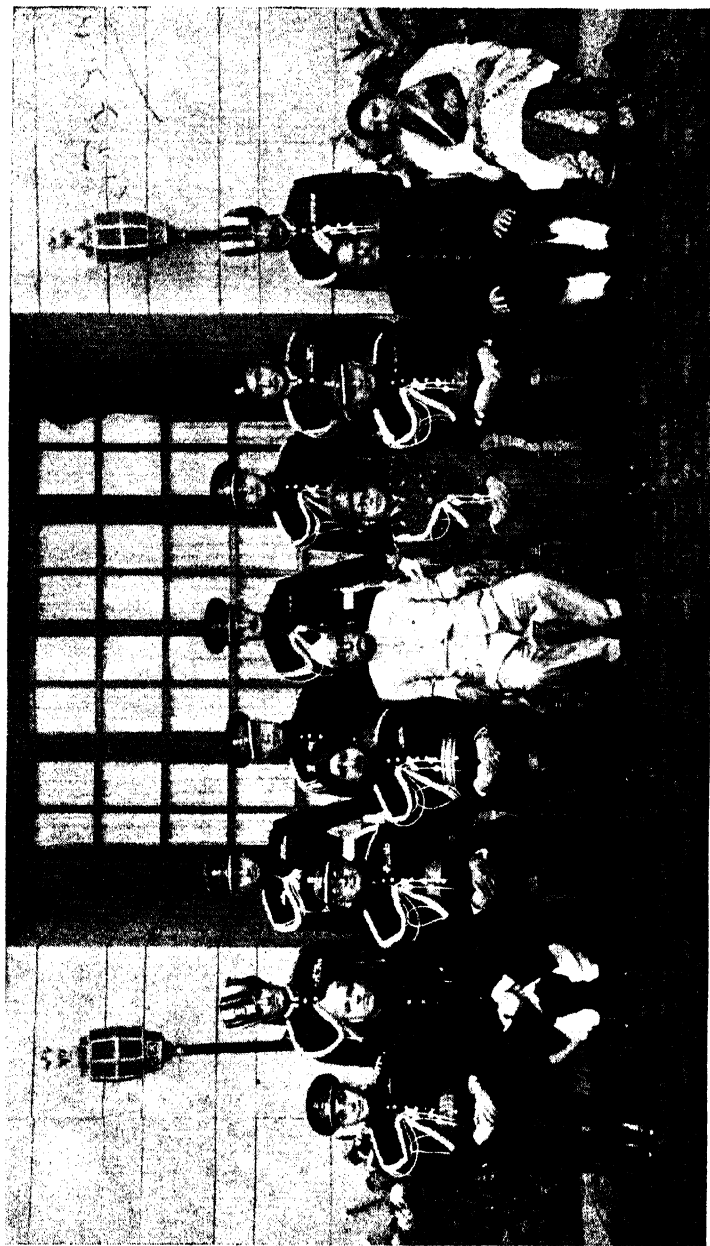
The yields from land had declined and were about the lowest in the world. Production on eighty-two per cent of the land depended entirely on the vagaries of the weather. Agriculture in India had been rightly described as a gamble in rains. Fitful distribution of rainfall affected 50,000,000 farmers, of whom 40,000,000 had holdings of less than five acres—fragmented in several bits owing to the inexorable laws and customs of inheritance. The bulk of the land supported not only the tillers of the soil but a host of intermediaries who had acquired interests in the land. The farmers were poor in resources and had no funds to carry out any improvements of their lands. Mere subsistence was a hard struggle for them. They had also become despondent at the step-motherly treatment given to them by the Government. During the economic depression they had seen foreign rice and wheat being permitted to be brought into India and sold at fantastically low prices which were below the cost of production in this country. The callous indifference to their welfare shown by the British Government had demoralised them, leaving little incentive to produce more than their bare requirements. Dr. Rajendra Prasad felt that it was going to be an uphill task to repair this damage to agriculture. But he set to it with a will. He decided that the farmers should be helped by the grant of substantial subsidies to dig wells and use better seed, fertilisers and implements. He got the Cabinet to sanction larger grants for this purpose. He also initiated measures for fixing minimum prices of foodgrains in parity with the price level of the main commodities. The tillers of the soil should also be assured of a fair share of the fruits of their labour. He therefore pressed the provincial governments to revise their land tenure laws, abolishing the intermediaries, who battered on the land, and giving the tenants fixity of tenure at reasonable rent with the option to purchase the landlords' rights at a reasonable price. From all these measures he did not expect quick results, for he knew that the farmer was slow and cautious and would only respond in full measure after his confidence had been restored. But he was happy that his efforts to stimulate the farmers were reflected in better harvests in succeeding years.

Had Dr. Rajendra Prasad continued as Food Minister he would have devoted more attention to the improvement of

cattle. Even before he had assumed office he used to take a keen interest in the care of cattle. Having been brought up on the land, he felt that the cow was not only a useful animal but a 'mother of prosperity'. A good bull was essential to agriculture and the cow supplied milk and butter—the most nutritive food in a country where the bulk of the population lived on a vegetarian diet. In his writings Rajendra Prasad had consistently urged that proper care of cattle should not be a matter of sentiment regarding the cow, but an economic necessity.

India is one of the most important cattle countries of the world. It has 158,000,000 cattle and 45,000,000 buffaloes, roughly one quarter of the cattle population of the world; and yet the per capita return from the cattle is the lowest in the world. About 50,000,000 cows of over three years give an average per capita yield of only two pounds of milk a day. It is not that they lack the potentiality of good milk supply. Under proper care, and in herds of well-tended cattle, an annual yield of over 4,000 pounds has been obtained, and in individual cases the yield has been as high as 7,000 to 8,000 pounds. But the average yield is low, because over 10·8 per cent of the adult cattle are decrepit and useless. They are a burden on the limited grazing grounds and a menace to the crops, for they are allowed to roam freely. Further, about twenty-five per cent of the cattle suffer from contagious diseases. India's resources cannot maintain this heavy and unproductive population. The fodder resources are only sufficient for seventy per cent of the cattle, and the food concentrates only for twenty-eight per cent.

Dr. Rajendra Prasad felt that the campaign for improvement of the cattle would have to be fought on many fronts. Firstly, the unfit and useless cattle should be segregated in *gosadans* (cattle camps) located in waste lands and inferior forests, to die a natural—or unnatural—death. Secondly, those which were fit should be developed and upgraded by selective breeding in groups of 'key villages'. The scrub animals should be sterilised and good stud bulls or artificial insemination should be provided. The aim should be to evolve a dual-purpose breed—good for milk as well as field and transport work. These schemes have been introduced by the Government of India but the pace is very slow. Only about one per cent of the developmental



Dr. Rajendra Prasad with the members of his staff at *Rashtrapati Bhavan*.

expenditure is available for this purpose! This is a poor recognition of what good cattle mean to an agricultural country dotted with 50,000,000 small farms. Milk and butter are important items of diet in this land of vegetarian habits.

Dr. Rajendra Prasad had also been taking particular interest in advocating scientific management of *goshallas* (cattle homes). About 3,000 *goshallas*, mainly located in cities and towns, maintain over six lakhs of unwanted cattle at an annual cost of about 70,000,000 rupees. The funds are mainly provided by public charities. He had been pressing for proper management of these *goshallas* which can become useful centres for the improvement of cattle and milk supply. Tanneries should be attached to all such centres. He has urged:

‘No one ever thought of making the cow a sound economic proposition so that a Hindu might never feel tempted to sell it to a non-Hindu. The cow-worshipping Hindus sold cows to the slaughter houses when it was more profitable than keeping them. Beef, hides, bones, fat and horns fetch a better price than milk. If cows are kept scientifically, if the milk yield is increased, cow dung is made full use of, and, after their death, the hides, bones and horns are properly utilised, keeping cows would be a source of profit instead of loss as it is today.’*

Had Dr. Rajendra Prasad continued to hold the portfolio of Minister for Food and Agriculture for a longer period, he would have zealously pursued his plans for the development of our cattle wealth on scientific lines, and would have mobilised the resources of the Government as well as the support of the people to secure proper care and full utilisation of our cattle.

At the time of taking over the Food and Agriculture Departments, Dr. Rajendra Prasad wondered how he would be able to handle them. With humility of spirit he examined his own qualifications. He had no experience of administration, except for a brief spell as President of the Patna Municipality, and that was of a very limited nature. He had been successful as a Congress organiser, but the nature of his work was of a different category. It was a matter of extending public relations and spreading the ideals of the Congress among the people. He knew that the work of the Minister for Food and Agriculture was going to be difficult and trying. Previously there

* *Autobiography* p. 579

were separate Ministers in charge of Agriculture and of Food. For the first time the two activities of production and distribution of food had been combined under one Minister.

He had assumed this heavy responsibility at a critical time—after successive lean harvests. The stocks with the Government were low, and imports from abroad were difficult. The shortage was so acute that the Government had put nearly forty per cent of the population under strict rationing. The elaborate structure of food controls was causing much social discontent among the people, who grumbled at the short ration, the high prices and the low quality of foodgrains supplied.

For successful administration the Food Minister in India needs primarily good rainfall. Dr. Rajendra Prasad started with bad harvests, but during his short tenure the rainfall was good. Apart from the increase in supplies, this created a feeling of confidence in the country. Next, the Food Minister needs the full support of his colleagues in the Cabinet—for grant of subsidies to the farmers, for sanction of foreign exchange to enable him to import foodgrains, and for fixing fair prices of foodgrains. Dr. Rajendra Prasad's status in the Party and his affable nature served him well, and he could always rely upon the fullest cooperation of his colleagues.

But even more important than these, the Food Minister should be able to carry with him the provinces and the princely states. For increasing the production as well as for securing equitable distribution of supplies the Food Minister could act only through them. They were his executive agents and also his eyes and ears. Food and Agriculture were the responsibility of the provinces and the states, and their Governments had assumed full control over production, purchase and distribution of foodgrains. The interests of the surplus and the deficit provinces were not identical; in fact they frequently clashed. The Food Minister had to reconcile these conflicting interests. The problem of food in India is largely the problem of feeding the cities and the towns by inducing a free flow of food from the farmers to the consumers in the urban areas. For this purpose the prices have to be attractive to the farmers, without being hard on the consumers. The Food Minister has thus to hold the scales even between the villages and the cities.

Dr. Rajendra Prasad was ideally suited for the task, for he

wielded great personal influence with the provinces and the states. His method of approach could wear down sullen or subtle resistance. Had Dr. Rajendra Prasad continued longer as Food Minister, he would have taken the country along the road to self-sufficiency and freedom from controls. Having lived with the farmers, he understood their difficulties, and his approach would have been practical—unhampered by the dictates of abstract theories. But he was required to put the Party's affairs in order and therefore could not continue in charge of Food and Agriculture.

As President, Dr. Rajendra Prasad loses no opportunity of appealing to the cultivators to grow more food. He feels strongly that the improvement of agriculture alone can bring joy and happiness to the people, and that it needs the highest priority in plans of national development. He has been reminding the *kisans* that 'it is a matter of disgrace that we should have to import foodgrains from other countries. Seventy per cent of our people pursue agriculture; the land is fertile and agriculture has been our main occupation for centuries. It is only the cultivator who can remove this slur from our country's name and it is his duty to do so'.* He has told the *kisans* on many occasions that they had not taken to the plough merely for meeting their personal or family needs, but that it was their duty to see that the entire nation got sufficient food for its requirements without having to import food from outside.

* *Speeches* 1952 p. 301

CHAPTER XVI

AT THE HELM OF THE CONGRESS

DR. RAJENDRA PRASAD had to resign the Food Ministership when he was compelled by circumstances to take over as President of the Congress for the third time. Acharya Kripalani had been feeling that after the advent of Independence, as President of the Congress, he had been put in the background. He was not being consulted by the Government and was not taken into confidence even when important changes in policy were being considered. A devoted constructive worker, he had done much to organise *ashrams* all over the country. His blunt and caustic comments upset many people. They were like flashes of lightning, which laid bare hidden crevices of deception, hypocrisy and lust for power. But his vitriolic tongue covered a gentle and sympathetic heart. He had devoted his life to the education of youth seeking an outlet for patriotic urges. As a young man with the same instincts he had been attracted by revolutionary ideas promising heaven on earth in a short time if the moral instincts could be suppressed in the cause of the country. But Gandhiji had completely changed his outlook. His mission of non-violence got such a complete hold of Kripalani that he dedicated his life to guiding and training the young in the same channels. He sought no reward for himself, and it was not in his nature to cling to office, however high, if he could not discharge the duties properly. His personal wants were few. Austerity had been his life companion. He cared little for power or prestige, but could not endure the insult to the office he held. He therefore declared his intention of resigning his post. Gandhiji sympathised with him, but felt that Nehru and Patel had an unquestioned hold on the Congress Party, and had not thought they need consult the President. Such internal differences between the leaders of the Party and of the Government have repeatedly occurred in the states also. The state committees have insisted on being kept in close touch with the state governments' policies. The Congress High Command has supported this demand. But the strong personalities of Nehru and Patel would not accept this curb on their authority at the Centre. Acharya Kripalani's resignation

was therefore accepted. Gandhiji favoured the appointment of Narendra Dev as President of the Congress; but Patel persuaded Nehru, and both of them appealed to Dr. Rajendra Prasad to accept the post. He did this reluctantly, particularly as Gandhiji did not like it. But he was so close to Sardar Patel's way of thinking that he felt he could not refuse to accept this responsibility at a time when the Congress above all needed stability, and his personal status would ensure close cooperation with the leaders of the Government.

As President of the Congress Rajendra Prasad played an important role in Mahatma Gandhi's last fast. 'We are steadily losing hold on Delhi,' Gandhiji said to a worker. 'If Delhi goes, India goes and with that goes the last hope of world peace.' The Muslims of Delhi related their difficulties to him and expressed their feeling of insecurity. The disturbances had been quelled by the police and the army; but bad feelings between the communities continued, and they might explode at any time. Gandhiji pondered over the situation and on the 12th of January, 1948, in his post-prayer speech, he announced that he would go on a fast from the next day for an indeterminate period until there was a reunion of hearts of all communities in Delhi. He stated that this fast was his protest against the wrong done by society, because he had no other remedy left. He said: 'Fasting is a *satyagrahi's* last resort in the place of the sword—his or other's. I have no answer to return to the Muslim friends who see me, from day to day, as to what they should do. My impotence has been gnawing at me. It will go, immediately the fast is undertaken. I have been brooding over it for the last three days. The final conclusion has flashed upon me, and that makes me happy. No man, if he is pure, has anything more precious to give than his life. I hope and pray that I have the purity in me to justify the step. The fast will end when and if I am satisfied that there is a reunion of hearts of all communities brought about without any outside pressure, but from an awakened sense of duty'.*

In spite of the clear statement of Gandhiji regarding the aim of his fast, Moulana Abul Kalam Azad in his book *India Wins Freedom* has repeated an unworthy charge against Sardar Patel, who is no longer able to refute it personally, that 'the fast was

* *Mahatma Gandhi*, by G. D. Tendulkar, Vol. VIII, p. 300

directed against the attitude of Sardar Patel and Patel knew that this was so' (p. 216). It is a surprising statement in view of Gandhiji's clearly written message to the prayer meeting on the 15th. A newspaper reporter had asked him the pointed question whether the fast 'is more intended to bring about a change of heart in Sardar Patel and thereby amounts to a condemnation of the policy of the Home Ministry'. Gandhiji replied: 'I was able to assure the critics that they were wrong in isolating the Sardar from Pandit Jawaharlal Nehru and me.... My statement was meant deliberately to free a lifelong and faithful comrade from any unworthy reproach.... I know that the Sardar would never betray or degrade his trust. I wonder if, with the knowledge of this background to my statement, anybody would dare call my present fast a condemnation of the policy of the Home Ministry... My fast, as I have stated in plain language, is undoubtedly on behalf of the Muslim minority in the Indian Union and, therefore, it is necessarily against the Hindus and Sikhs of the Union and the Muslims of Pakistan'.*

The news of the fast spread consternation throughout the country. At the age of seventy-eight Gandhiji was playing with death by undergoing this fast. Would his frail body be able to stand for long the rigours of a rigid fast? Urgent and immediate action was necessary to save his life. The leaders of the communities should get together and satisfy Gandhiji that the communities were determined to shed ill-will and live in mutual tolerance and peace. Dr. Rajendra Prasad took the lead in calling the leaders of the communities to his residence. After protracted discussions, his persuasive powers prevailed and ultimately, on the 18th, the leaders, assembled under his chairmanship, issued a joint declaration stating that it was the heartfelt desire of Hindus, Muslims and Sikhs and all other communities to live in Delhi like brothers, and that they pledged their lives, property and faith for the restoration of conditions for peaceful co-existence. Dr. Rajendra Prasad, accompanied by the leaders, immediately took the declaration to Gandhiji. The leaders assured Gandhiji that they would do everything to achieve their end by their personal efforts and not with the help of the police or the army. Dr. Rajendra

* *Mahatma Gandhi*, by G. D. Tendulkar, Vol. VIII, p. 314

Prasad also assured Gandhiji that the leaders were confident that they would keep the pledge and requested him to break his fast. His face was lined with deep anxiety as he explained the detailed measures to be taken. Gandhiji was satisfied that a change of heart had occurred and broke the fast. The pledge was kept by the communities.

Little did Rajendra Prasad realise that Gandhiji would be with them for only a few days more. On the 30th of January, 1948, he met Gandhiji early in the morning before flying to Wardha to attend a meeting of the Congress workers. For over an hour he discussed with him matters affecting the future programme of the Congress. In the evening, as he reached the *ashram* at Wardha, he received the stunning news of Gandhiji's assassination. Rajendra Prasad recalled how in the soft light of the setting sun, after the day's toil, people used to gather round Gandhiji to join in the mass prayers and to listen to Gandhiji's homely and simple comments on current events. These prayer meetings attracted men of divers religions and creeds, for they dealt with the substance of all religions. On the fateful Friday Gandhiji walked from his room to the open space where the people had assembled. As usual there was a crowd of men to greet him, but one madman came forward and fired three shots at him at close range. Gandhiji fell and his last words were: '*He, Rama*' (in Thy hands, O Lord).

His death was as radiant as his life. He had been repeatedly warned that there might be an attempt on his life, for he preached love and tolerance to all, and this did not appeal to bigots and fanatics. But he scorned danger. A few days before the assassination a bomb had exploded at the prayer meeting. The police officers took all the necessary precautions, but they could not be effective unless they could search suspicious strangers for hidden arms. They repeatedly sought Gandhiji's permission to do so. But Gandhiji would not agree. He said that his life was in the hands of God, and he would not like any restrictions being placed on attendance at the meeting or anybody being allowed to come between himself and his audience. Sardar Patel personally pleaded with him to allow the police to do their duty in protecting him, but without success. The assassin got his opportunity. 'Gandhiji could not have died more beautifully than he did,' said Rajendra Prasad.

But his death created a void in Rajendra Prasad's life. He recalled the early days in Champaran when Gandhiji had cast his spell over him. Rajendra Prasad had been groping in the dark for a way of life that would satisfy his inner urge, for the life of a successful lawyer had become a mechanical affair to him. Gandhiji showed him the light which illumined his life and gave it purpose and direction. Like a flint Gandhiji struck a spark on Rajendra Prasad's steel, and he renounced home and happiness to serve the people. He soon became Gandhiji's devoted disciple, for he accepted the doctrine of love, truth and non-violence without any mental reservation. Whenever inner conflicts assailed him he sought Gandhiji's advice—not by writing long letters to him but by discussing them personally with him. Gandhiji appreciated his integrity of purpose and the courage of his determination. It was Gandhiji who earmarked him for the portfolio of Food and Agriculture; and later when the Constituent Assembly was launched—on what might have been a stormy career—Gandhiji had suggested his name as President of the historic Assembly.

But Rajendra Prasad reflected that his *guru* had now gone, leaving a legacy of lofty ideals. It was now his duty to fulfil his teachings and to propagate his gospel. It was sadly necessary at this juncture, for the struggle for freedom was a continual one. Freedom must not only be won but kept and preserved. Its fruition could only be gained by continual sacrifices. In his broadcast he appealed to the nation: 'The real time for renunciation is now when you have got something to sacrifice'.

CHAPTER XVII

PRESIDENT OF THE CONSTITUENT ASSEMBLY

WHILE he was still the Food Minister as well as the President of the Congress, Dr. Rajendra Prasad was compelled by circumstances to assume the duties of Presidentship of the Constituent Assembly. The idea of a Constituent Assembly had been simmering in people's minds from the beginning of the freedom struggle in the twenties. With prophetic vision Gandhiji in 1922 had stated:

‘Swaraj will not be a gift of the British Parliament. It will be a declaration of India's full self-expression, expressed through an Act of Parliament. But it will be only a courteous ratification of the declared wish of the people of India. The ratification will be a treaty to which Britain will be a party. The British Parliament, when the settlement comes, will ratify the wishes of the people of India as expressed through the freely chosen representatives.’

The right to frame their own Constitution had been the aspiration of the people throughout the struggle. It first found concrete expression in May, 1934, when the *Swaraj* Party, under the leadership of Pandit Motilal Nehru, passed a formal resolution as under :

‘This Conference claims for India the right of self-determination, and the only method of applying the principle is to convene a Constituent Assembly, representative of all sections of the Indian people, to frame an acceptable Constitution.’

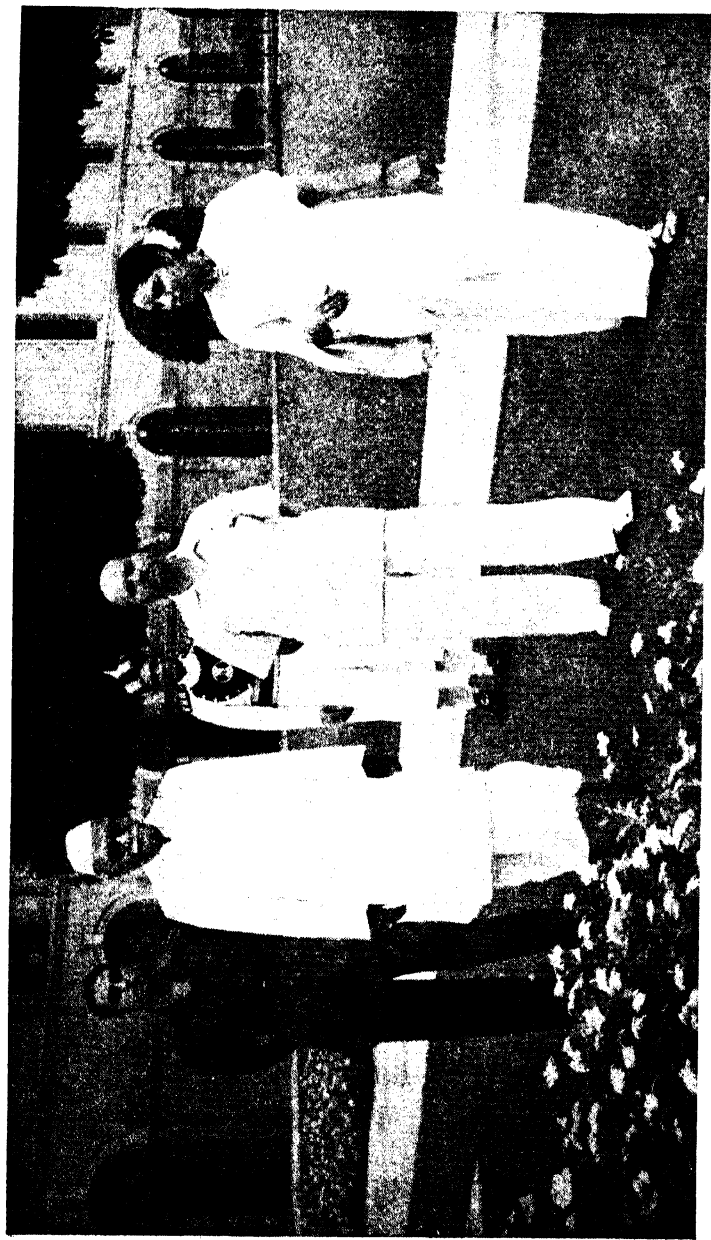
The same year, at the Congress session under the presidentship of Dr. Rajendra Prasad, a resolution was passed demanding that the Constitution of India should be framed by a Constituent Assembly composed of the representatives of the people. Nineteen months later, at the Lucknow session, the Congress reiterated its demand for the right of the people to frame the Constitution of India.

The Muslim League had expressed no opinion on this subject until 1940, when it passed a resolution demanding a separate territory for the Muslims, and asked for the appointment of two Constituent Assemblies—one for the areas claimed by the

League as a separate state and another for the rest of India.

The Cripps Plan had accepted the demand for a Constituent Assembly. This was also repeated by the Cabinet Mission in its statement of the 16th of May, 1946, which had been accepted in this respect both by the Congress and the Muslim League. But a controversy arose as regards the rights of the sections and the provinces. Dr. Rajendra Prasad felt that it was open to the Constituent Assembly to vary the proposals contained in the Plan, to reject or improve upon them; otherwise, the Constituent Assembly would not be a sovereign body. Jawaharlal Nehru would accept no curb on the authority of the Assembly. As President of the Congress, he declared: 'The Congress had agreed to the election of candidates for the Constituent Assembly, but what we do there, we are entirely and absolutely free to determine. We accept no outside interference in it, certainly not the British Government's interference, and therefore the limiting factors of the sovereignty of the Constituent Assembly are not accepted by us'. This was countered by the Secretary of State for India on the 18th of July. He emphasised that as the parties had agreed to the Cabinet Mission statement of the 16th of May, it was incumbent on them to function within the terms of the Agreement, and that His Majesty's Government would not accept the decisions of the Constituent Assembly if they did not conform to the terms of the Agreement.

While the controversy was going on, preparations were being made for holding the elections to the Constituent Assembly. The ideal course would have been to provide for election of the members of the Assembly on the basis of universal adult franchise. But this course would have involved delay, and speed was of importance. Hence, the Cabinet Mission Plan had provided for the election of the members of the Constituent Assembly by the newly elected Provincial Legislative Assemblies. Each province was allotted a number of seats in proportion to its population—one seat per million. The voters were divided into three separate electorates—the General, the Muslim and the Sikh. All non-Muslims and non-Sikhs were grouped under the General. Out of the total of 389 seats, British India was given 296 and the Indian states ninety-three. The elections were held in July, 1946. They revealed the



In the Moghul Gardens. Dr. Rajendra Prasad with his A.D.C., Captain Joginder Singh, Mr. R. L. Handa and Mrs. Darbar. [Courtesy: *Tribune, Ambala*]

strength of the Congress and the Muslim League. The former captured 212 seats, the latter seventy-three and the Independents eleven.

The Congress had secured ninety-one per cent of the General votes. Mr. Jinnah called it a 'brute majority'. The Muslim League felt apprehensive of the possibility of the Constituent Assembly functioning as a sovereign body unfettered by any basic limitations of function or procedure. On the 29th of July it resiled from its acceptance of participation in the Constituent Assembly on the ground that the Congress intended to upset the basic scheme in regard to the grouping of the provinces and wanted to make the Constituent Assembly function as a sovereign body.

Undaunted, the Congress Working Committee decided on the 10th of August to proceed with the work in the Constituent Assembly. Jawaharlal Nehru in his broadcast on the 7th of September said that he did not look upon the Constituent Assembly as an arena for conflict or for the forcible imposition of one point of view over another. The Congress was determined to find a common basis for an agreement on all controversial items, and he invited those who differed from it to enter the Constituent Assembly as equals and partners. The broadcast was considered by the people as an assurance to the Muslim League on the vexed question of the provincial grouping. But Mr. Jinnah was not satisfied. He said: 'Mr. Nehru has made no definite proposals to me; you cannot butter parsnips with words; I have been stabbed and kind words will not stop the bleeding'.

On the 15th of October the Muslim League joined the Interim Cabinet, but made no commitment either as regards joining the Constituent Assembly or withdrawing 'direct action'. The Viceroy pressed the Muslim League to accept the 16th of May statement and come into the Constituent Assembly. But Mr. Jinnah wanted an assurance that the rights of the sections would be implemented by the British Government. The Viceroy declined to do so on the ground that it would not be possible to control what happened in the Constituent Assembly.

The 9th of December had been provisionally fixed for the first meeting of the Constituent Assembly. In spite of the oppo-

sition of the Muslim League, the Congress pressed that the Assembly should be called on the appointed date. It stressed the legal and moral obligation to go on with the Constituent Assembly. The Assembly had already been elected, and though it had not met, it was duly constituted and must start functioning at an early date. The Congress wanted all the parties to join it, but would not accept the veto of any party to hold up the work of the Constituent Assembly. It was felt that the initial session of about ten days could concern itself with the formal matters of procedure, and that the Assembly could then adjourn for some time to enable an agreement to be reached with the Muslim League. The Viceroy did not think he could delay the meeting of the Constituent Assembly; and on the 20th of November he issued the invitations for the meeting on the 9th of December.

Mr. Jinnah called it 'one more blunder of a very grave and serious character'. He felt that the Viceroy was playing into the hands of the Congress, and he called upon the representatives of the Muslim League not to participate in the **Constituent Assembly**.

The stalemate between the Congress and the Muslim League continued, and in a last-minute effort to find a basis of agreement between the two major parties, the leaders of the Congress, the Muslim League and the Sikhs were invited to discuss the matter with the Secretary of State and the Viceroy in London. Nehru, Jinnah, Liaquat Ali Khan and Baldev Singh left for London on the 2nd of December. The gulf was too wide, and on the 6th of December the British Government issued a statement that no settlement had been reached. It added that if the Constitution was framed by a Constituent Assembly in which a large section of the Indian population had not been represented, such a Constitution could not be forced upon any unwilling parts of the country.

In an atmosphere of suspense and tension the Constituent Assembly met on the 9th of December, 1946. The members of the Muslim League remained absent; 205 members, including nine women, were present. It was a gathering of talents from all over India, the pick of the country—political workers, lawyers and administrators—united by their devotion to the service of the country. Distinguished men from other parties had also

been brought in with the help of the Congress. There was an unshakable determination in their faces to let nothing interfere with the work of the Assembly.

Jawaharlal Nehru set the pace for a sovereign republic that 'will attain its rightful and honoured place in the world and make its full and willing contribution to the promotion of world peace and the welfare of mankind'. Sardar Patel was keen to secure an ordered growth of society by guaranteeing the fundamental rights of individuals. Distinguished lawyers, such as Dr. Ambedkar, Alladi Krishnaswamy Aiyar, Dr. M. R. Jayakar and K. M. Munshi, dominated the scene. Dr. Radhakrishnan poured forth a flood of oratory and lifted the debates to a higher level. Sarojini Naidu who was hailed as the 'bulbul-i-Hind' (Songbird of India) brought to it a poet's dream of the glory of India that had been revived. Experienced administrators like Gopalaswamy Ayyangar, and public workers like Acharya Kripalani, Rafi Ahmed Kidwai, Dr. S. P. Mookerjee, Dr. Pattabhi Sitaramayya, K. Santhanam, Dr. Mahmud and Frank Anthony made valuable contributions to the proceedings of the Committees and the Assembly. Sir Benegal Rau was the adviser of the Assembly and did the lion's share of the work in framing the Constitution and drafting it. Dr. Ambedkar was the Chairman of the drafting Committee and became the 'architect of the Constitution'. Later, while expressing dissatisfaction with some of its provisions, he humorously explained, 'I was a hack. I did what I was asked to do'.

Dr. Sachidanand Sinha, as the oldest member present, was elected temporary chairman. A permanent president was to be elected. It had been tentatively decided by the High Command that Gopalaswamy Ayyangar, who had been elected with the help of the Congress, should be nominated the president. But when the members arrived in Delhi, it soon became apparent that they were not satisfied with this arrangement, and the general opinion was that the fittest person for this post was Dr. Rajendra Prasad. Personally, he was not very keen about it. As he says: 'I felt that it would be too heavy a responsibility and turned down the offer as I was already preoccupied with the work of two departments of the Government (Food and Agriculture). When the matter finally came up before the Working Committee, I said that if I was relieved of the office

in the Government, I had no objection to taking up the chairmanship. But the Committee did not accept that condition. It appeared that many members of the Constituent Assembly were determined to elect me and I decided then to bow to their will'.* He was unanimously elected President.

The task of the Constituent Assembly was a difficult one. It met in an atmosphere of tension owing to the intransigence of the Muslim League, which had not only boycotted the Constituent Assembly but had initiated 'direct action' in the country, leading to bloodshed and carnage on an unprecedented scale. It was imperative that the work of the Assembly should be carried on in such a way as to lessen the feeling of distrust and hostility of the Muslims. Secondly, certain limitations had been put on the Assembly by the Cabinet Mission Plan, which formed the basis of its work. These limitations struck at the sovereign character of the Constituent Assembly, and it was therefore necessary to assert its independence. In his inaugural address to the Assembly Dr. Rajendra Prasad made it clear that he would not tolerate any interference with its work. He stated:

'I am aware that this Assembly has been born with certain limitations placed on it from its birth. We may not forget, disregard or ignore these limitations in the course of our proceedings and in arriving at our decisions.

'But I know, too, that in spite of these limitations, the Assembly is a self-governing and self-determining independent body in whose proceedings no outside authority can interfere and whose decisions no one outside can upset or alter or modify.

'Indeed, it is in the power of this Constituent Assembly to get rid of and to demolish the very limitations which have been attached to it at its birth, and I hope that you, ladies and gentlemen, who have come here to frame the constitution of an independent and free India, will be able to get rid of these limitations and place before the world a model constitution, that will satisfy the people of all groups and communities and religions inhabiting this vast land, and will ensure to everyone freedom of action, of thought, of belief, and of worship, which will guarantee to everyone opportunities of rising to his highest

and which will guarantee to everyone freedom in all respects.'

Many tributes were paid to Dr. Rajendra Prasad. Dr. Radhakrishnan said: 'In Dr. Rajendra Prasad we have one who embodies the spirit of gentleness, the gospel of India. He is the soul of goodness, he has great patience and courage, he has suffered. . . . Rajendra Prasad is the suffering servant of India, of the Congress, who incarnates the spirit for which this country stands'.* Gopalaswamy Ayyangar pointed out that his election was a supreme mark of the unstinted confidence that the Assembly and the country as a whole reposed in him. 'It is not so much an honour to him; he has really honoured us by accepting the invitation that we have extended to him. . . . His life has been a life of dedication—dedication to the service of the country. . . What really has established and will maintain the unique hold he has on the affections of his countrymen, irrespective of community, class and creed, are his great human qualities. His innate courtesy, for instance, the manner of his approach to problems, which manner almost compellingly disarms in controversy. . . . the soft word that turneth away wrath—these will be inestimable assets in contributing to the success of the task that he has so willingly, perhaps after some reluctance, taken upon himself.'* Sarojini Naidu said that Rajendra Prasad was descended spiritually from the Great Buddha, the embodiment of compassion, understanding, sacrifice and love. He would make a reliable guardian and father of the Assembly because 'in him there is essential sweetness, that is part of his strength; there is essential wisdom, that is part of his experience; there is essential clarity of vision, creative imagination and creative faith that brings him very near the feet of Lord Buddha himself'.†

Dr. Rajendra Prasad, while thanking the numerous speakers for their felicitations, said that as President he was not expected to do anything in the Assembly which would show that he belonged to a particular party or sect. 'You will accept that whatever I do here will be done in a spirit of service to you all.'† He pointed out that the Assembly had been brought into existence by three forces: the sufferings of our patriots, the history

* *Constituent Assembly Proceedings* p. 38

† *Ibid.* p. 47

of the British nation and its generosity, and the forces that were raging in the world. He said: 'I will give the Assembly whatever strength God has bestowed upon me, whatever little wisdom has been given to me and whatever experience of the world I have'. He hoped that the members of the Muslim League would soon occupy their seats and help in creating a Constitution which would guarantee to everyone all that can be guaranteed, and that need to be guaranteed, and all that required to be guaranteed, and will not leave any room for any complaint from any side. Above all, he said: 'What we need is freedom and, as someone has said, "Nothing is more valuable than the freedom to be free"'. Let us hope and pray that as a result of the labours of this Constituent Assembly we shall have achieved that freedom and we shall be proud of it.*

After transacting formal business the Assembly considered the resolution moved by Nehru in regard to the objectives of the Republic. At the suggestion of M. R. Jayakar further consideration of it was postponed till the 20th of January in order to leave the door open for the Muslim League. But this gesture was disregarded and the Muslim League showed no intention of revising its decision and fixed the meetings of its council on the 26th of January, thus continuing its boycott of the Assembly. At the second session of the Assembly on the 20th of January the Objectives Resolution moved by Jawaharlal Nehru was passed. It declared the Assembly's firm and solemn resolve to draw up for future governance a Constitution, providing for a Union of the provinces and the Indian states, which would be autonomous units, subject to the powers granted to the Union. The Constitution would guarantee for all people social, economic and political justice, equality and freedom of expression and worship.

The Constituent Assembly worked with greater freedom after the 15th of August, when the Indian Independence Act of 1947 came into effect. It set up two independent dominions of India and of Pakistan. The suzerainty of the British Crown over the Indian States lapsed on that day and so also the treaty relations with the tribal areas. The Act gave unlimited power to the Constituent Assembly of each dominion to frame and adopt

any constitution superseding the Indian Independence Act without any further legislation by the British Parliament, whose responsibility for the governance of India ceased on that day. The Constituent Assembly of India reassembled on the midnight of the 14th of August as the Sovereign Assembly of India. The Council of State and the Legislative Assembly ceased to exist on that day. Until the Constituent Assembly was able to frame the new Constitution and a new legislature was constituted thereunder, it was the Constituent Assembly that was to function also as the Central Legislature of the Dominion. In other words, it had a dual function—constituent as well as legislative. The Constituent Assembly had twelve sessions from the 9th of December, 1946, to the 26th of November, 1949. Six committees were appointed. Jawaharlal Nehru was the Chairman of the States Committee, the Union Powers Committee, and the Union Constitution Committee. Vallabhbhai Patel was Chairman of the Fundamental Rights Committee, the Provincial Constitutions Committee and the Minorities Committee. The reports presented by the Committees were considered by the Assembly and the final drafts were completed in February, 1948. From November, 1948, to November, 1949, the Assembly sat continuously and completed its work.

In framing the Constitution the experience of other countries was freely utilised. The Constitution embodies the idea of the parliamentary form of Government as obtaining in Britain, because it was felt that it ensured smooth administration and provided for continuous assessment of the responsibility of the ministers. The idea of the Fundamental Rights, guaranteeing certain basic freedoms, was taken from the U.S.A., with the addition of Directive Principles—recommendations for the guidance of the Governments, as provided in the Irish Free State Constitution. The federal structure was mainly based on the Canadian and the Australian models.

The Constitution of India, embodied in 395 Articles and eight Schedules, is the longest in the world. Detailed provisions became necessary as all the loopholes revealed in other written constitutions had to be plugged. The length of the Constitution is also due to several other factors. The Constituent Assembly had to take into consideration the provisions made in the Government of India Act of 1935 and had to cover much

common ground. The Act had never been fully enforced; the part relating to provincial autonomy had been operative from April, 1937, but the part dealing with the federal structure had never been brought into effect. On the analogy of the Act, the Constitution dealt not only with fundamental principles of government but also with matters relating to administration. A variety of problems such as those relating to scheduled castes and tribes, different categories of provinces, official language, public services and the organisation of courts have also been dealt with in the Constitution. Together with Fundamental Rights, the Directive Principles have been laid down for the guidance of the Governments. The legislative spheres of the Union and the states have been defined in the schedules covering 210 items.

The question which had agitated the minds of the members was whether the constitutional structure of the country should be federal or unitary. The latter was preferable, for a strong centre was necessary in an underdeveloped country which aspired to a higher standard of living of the people. The tradition of the country had also been in favour of a unitary constitution. But the Cabinet Mission Plan was based on a federal structure of the Central Government. Under the Act of 1935, the provinces had been granted a substantial measure of autonomy and the six hundred-odd Indian states had acceded to the Union on the basis of a federal Union Government. There was also the hope, in the initial stages, of the Muslim League coming in on the basis of provincial or group autonomy. The Constitution was therefore framed on the structure of a federal Union Government. But it is a very different form of federation from that prevailing, for example, in the U.S.A. In that country the federal state was the result of the fusion of several states into a single state for matters of common interest, while each unit continued to enjoy autonomous powers in regard to other matters. The U.S.A. Constitution was thus framed as the result of a compact between the federating units. In India this was not the case. The Constitution was framed by 'the people of India', assembled in the Constituent Assembly.

The Constitution of India is neither purely federal nor purely unitary but a combination of both. The states are subordinate

to the Union. The Union Parliament can change even the boundaries of the states by a simple majority in the ordinary course of law. The states have no constitutions of their own and have no right to frame them. They do not have even equality of rights. The representation of the states in the Council of States varies from one to thirty-one.

Further, the Union has the residuary powers. It can control legislation and administration in the states. The President can withhold his assent to any provincial legislation. There is only one citizenship of India—no separate citizenship as in U.S.A. The main administrative service is federal in structure. The Union Government controls recruitment, discipline and other matters of the services and can also use the state services for executing its orders. The executive power of the states can only be exercised so as not to interfere with the executive power of the Union. The Union Government can give directives to the state governments and can supersede them. Although the administration of justice is a state subject, the judges of the state high courts are to be appointed and removed by the Union Government. The Union Parliament can assume legislative powers, though temporarily, over any subject in the exclusive state list by a decision of a majority of the members present and voting in the Council of States. In case of emergencies, financial and otherwise, the President can give a direction on any matter, and the legislative powers of the Union Parliament would then extend to the matters in the state list. The President can also assume the legislative and executive power of the states whenever he is satisfied that their government cannot be carried on in accordance with the Constitution. All these safeguards have been incorporated in the Constitution with the object of making the Union Government strong enough to combat external aggression and also to deal with subversive forces within the country.

The Indian Constitution strikes a compromise between the supremacy of the judiciary as in the U.S.A. and the sovereignty of Parliament as in the U.K. The powers of the Indian Parliament have been defined in the Constitution. The judiciary can declare a law invalid if it is beyond the competence of the legislature or is in contravention of the Fundamental Rights mentioned in the Constitution. On the other hand, the major

portion of the Constitution, including the provisions relating to Fundamental Rights, is liable to be amended by the Union Parliament, which is supreme within the bounds of the Constitution.

Our Constitution also strikes a happy mean between rigidity and flexibility. No provision of the Constitution is unalterable. The procedure of making amendments to the Constitution varies according to the importance of the matter. The federal provisions require not only a special majority but also the ratification by at least half of the states. Some articles of the Constitution remain in force only until the Parliament otherwise prescribes. Some provisions, such as those relating to the boundaries of the states, can be altered by a simple majority in the Parliament. Other provisions, including those relating to Fundamental Rights, can be amended by a majority of not less than two-thirds of the total number of members present and voting in each of the two Houses of Parliament. The Indian Parliament has thus been invested with constituent powers also.

As President of the Assembly Dr. Rajendra Prasad had to maintain a neutral attitude, for he had ceased to be a party man, but his firmness in handling the proceedings won him the admiration of the people. His impartiality inspired confidence among the members of the minorities and those who differed from the Congress. However, his most valuable contribution was behind the scenes. There were internal contradictions, not only among the various communities represented in the Assembly but even within the Congress party. Some were bent on having a strong Union Government while others attached great value to the Fundamental Rights of the people. These conflicting views were held even by top leaders, and a President of the standing of Dr. Rajendra Prasad alone could secure impartial and unfettered discussion. His deep erudition and sound knowledge of jurisprudence were freely available to all members, who frequently sought his advice on the problems and valued it, for it arose out of a profound study and wide experience of human affairs. He had so endeared himself to the people that on the 26th of January the Assembly unanimously elected him the interim President of the Indian Republic.



26th January, 1950. Dr. Rajendra Prasad being sworn in as President of India.
[Courtesy: *Rashtrapati Bhawan*]

CHAPTER XVIII

PRESIDENT OF THE REPUBLIC OF INDIA

DR. RAJENDRA PRASAD's nomination as the first President of India was hailed with delight by the people. Here was a man of unimpeachable personal integrity with the strength of solid rock. He could be fully trusted as the custodian of the Constitution. He was nominated interim President on the 26th of January, 1950, elected President in May, 1952, and re-elected in May, 1957.

The Constitution framed by the Constituent Assembly came into force on the 26th of January, 1950. It provided for the election of the President by an electoral college consisting of the elected representatives of both Houses of Parliament and the Legislative Assemblies of the states. Immediately on the Constitution coming into effect, nomination had to be made by the Constituent Assembly for the post of interim President to hold the post until a President was elected under the new Constitution. The members of the Assembly favoured the nomination of Rajendra Prasad, who had won their deep regard and respect by his able and impartial handling of the proceedings of the Assembly. But there was another aspirant from among the Congress leaders for this post. Efforts were made on behalf of C. R. Rajagopalachari to persuade Dr. Rajendra Prasad to express his unwillingness for the nomination. Rajendra Prasad's reply was characteristic. He had never sought any office and was no seeker in this case. It was for the people to decide who was the fittest man. He would in no way fetter their choice. If the people wanted to nominate him for the post of President, who was he to say 'no' to them? The people were emphatic and made it clear to the High Command that he was their choice. Dr. Rajendra Prasad was appointed interim President. The elections took place on the 7th of April, 1952. Dr. Rajendra Prasad was opposed by his old friend K. T. Shah who told him: 'If you had not stood for a Party I would not have opposed you'. His opposition was designed to focus the discontent with regard to the sweeping economic reforms of the Congress. Dr. Rajendra Prasad received 2896 votes out of a total of 3486 votes cast. His opponent had the

support of disgruntled anti-Congress elements. Rajendra Prasad was sworn in as the first President of India on the 13th of May, 1952. In his broadcast to the Nation he said:

‘ I have just taken the oath of office as President and affirmed my determination to dedicate myself to the service of this great country. As President I stand before you as the sign and symbol of the Republic of India As an individual and a countryman of yours, and even more so as a comrade with many of you in the struggle for India’s freedom, I am overwhelmed with gratitude for this signal mark of your confidence, but even more than the gratitude, I feel the heavy responsibility and burden of this high office

‘ My request to all the people of this country is to treat me as one of them and to give me the opportunity and encouragement to serve them to the best of my capacity. I pray that God may give me the strength and wisdom to dedicate myself in the true spirit of service to the fulfilment of my duties and responsibilities.’

The office of President is not a post of authority. Under the Constitution the executive authority is vested in the President, but it is to be exercised in accordance with the Constitution which provides for a Council of Ministers to aid and advise the President. There is no specific provision in the Constitution that the President shall always act on the advice of his ministers. This omission has led to considerable difference of opinion among experts and jurists. It has been held by some—notably M. C. Setalvad and B. N. Rau—that our Constitution is based on the concept of sovereignty of Parliament to be exercised by the Cabinet responsible to the legislature. This sovereignty can only be ensured by the President acting always on the advice of his ministers. If he were free to act on the advice of other than that of his ministers, the sovereignty of Parliament would be infringed, for under the Constitution a presidential act cannot be discussed in Parliament. They hold that such curtailment of the powers of Parliament cannot be made without an express provision in the Constitution. They urge that the Constituent Assembly while framing the Constitution had intended that, as a constitutional head, the President would always act on the advice of his ministers. Dr. Rajendra Prasad was also of the same view during the debates in the Constituent Assembly. He had stated:

‘Although there is no specific provision in the Constitution itself making it binding on the President to accept the advice of his ministers, it is hoped that the convention under which in England the King always acted on the advice of his ministers would be established in this country also and that the President would become a constitutional President in all matters.’

In England the Queen always acts through the Prime Minister, who is the leader of the majority party in the Parliament. She does not attend the Cabinet meetings but receives reports of all the meetings and any official papers that she may like to see. No secrets are kept from her. She is generally taken into confidence, and by convention she has the right to advise, encourage or warn her ministers. As Bagehot puts it, by convention the sovereign has ‘the right to be consulted, the right to encourage and the right to warn’. The monarch’s power of veto has fallen into disuse; but she is not a figurehead and can play an important role even within a highly developed system of ministerial responsibility.

A contrary opinion is held by some jurists such as Patanjali Shastri, former Chief Justice of the Supreme Court. They hold that under the Indian Constitution the President is free to reject the advice of his ministers because no limitation can be put on the President’s powers except by a specific provision in the Constitution. Our Constitution merely states that the President shall have a Council of Ministers to aid and advise him. It does not provide that the President shall always accept the advice—as has been done in the constitution of the Irish Free State. They argue that this cannot be a mere matter of convention. Many conventions operative in England have been expressly included in our Constitution. The omission to include this convention is therefore significant. They further argue that all the conventions of the English constitution cannot be binding in India because the conditions differ greatly. Firstly, the structure of the Government of India is quasi-federal, wherein the states have been invested with certain independent powers. These powers have to be maintained even against the encroachments of the Union Governments. The President is elected not only by the Union legislature but also by the state legislatures. It is therefore his function to hold the scales even between the states and the Union Governments. Secondly, the

Queen in England is a constitutional monarch and Parliament is supreme. In India the Constitution is supreme, and it is the obligation of the President to exercise his powers in such a manner that there is no infringement of the Constitution. For this purpose he is to be guided by his personal judgment and this may lead him to reject the advice of his ministers.

The argument of the jurists is further supported by the fact that the Indian Constitution expressly provides that 'the question whether any, and if so what, advice was tendered by the ministers to the President shall not be enquired into in any court', and therefore the validity of a presidential act, even if it were not in accordance with the advice of the Union ministers, cannot be challenged in any court on that ground.

Apart from the legal interpretation of the Constitution there are certain practical considerations. If a State Bill is reserved by the Governor and referred to the President as to whether assent should be given or not, it would be anomalous if the President acted upon the advice of the Union ministers in a matter which is within the sole jurisdiction of the state government. This may lead to a complicated situation if the political affiliation of the state government is not the same as that of the Union Government.

Further, there is an express provision in the Constitution that appointments to specified key posts shall be made by the President. This provision has been made in order to ensure that these posts, such as members of the Union Public Service Commission, Judges of the Supreme Court and the High Courts, the Attorney-General, the Auditor-General and the Election Commissioner, are not filled by the Government on political grounds. If the President can exercise no independent powers and must act on the advice of the Union ministers, then the intention of the Constitution may be nullified and the President would be powerless to prevent it.

Another argument in their support is that under the Constitution the President may be removed from office by impeachment for violation of the Constitution—which it is his duty to preserve, protect and defend. The responsibility of ensuring that there is no infringement of the Constitution is therefore personal and cannot be shifted by the President to the Union Government. Taking these factors into consideration, the

jurists argue that it is within the discretion of the President to accept or reject the advice of the Union ministers.

In view of this conflict of opinion, the constitutional position of the President is not very clear. But no occasion has arisen for its clarification so far, because the personal relations between the President and the Prime Minister have been cordial. Dr. Rajendra Prasad's temperament is also such that he tries to avoid a crisis of any sort and would rather reach an understanding than force an issue. This is more so when he has an old friend like Jawaharlal Nehru to deal with. In some cases, when he is inclined to be firm, he has been able to convince Nehru of his point of view. The postponement of consideration of the Hindu Code Bill in 1951 was one instance. Public opinion was strongly against rushing this piece of legislation and held that a legislature elected by the indirect vote for the purpose of framing the Constitution was not competent to deal with a matter which affected the traditional roots of Hindu society with regard to marriage and inheritance. It argued that in a country like England the constitutional convention would require that such basic legislation should be undertaken after obtaining a clear verdict of the electorate. If the Prime Minister had pushed the Bill at the tail-end of the session, an embarrassing position would have been created. The President had advised the Prime Minister to postpone the Hindu Code Bill. He was prepared to appeal to the legislature by sending a message with that recommendation. Good counsels, however, prevailed and the Government bowed to the force of public opinion and decided to postpone the Bill till after the elections.

It is clear that the President of India has all the powers of the monarch in England and, in addition, those which the Constitution confers upon him. The Constitution expressly provides that the President shall be informed of the decisions of the Council of Ministers. It also authorises the President to ask the Prime Minister to place before the Cabinet any action taken by a minister. He can thus direct the attention of the Cabinet to any matter in which he feels that the action of a minister should be reviewed by the Cabinet.

It is also clear that the President can reject the advice of his ministers if it would result in an encroachment on the rights of the states as guaranteed by the Constitution. Such occasions

might arise if the Union Ministry were to advise him to refuse his assent to a State Bill dealing exclusively with matters within the jurisdiction of the state as specified in List II of Schedule VII. A dominating Union Ministry is likely to try and control state legislation even by stretching the provisions of the Constitution. If this happens—borderline cases have arisen—it would be for the President to decide whether he should accept the advice of his ministers or reject it.

Obviously the President is in no way bound to accept the advice of his ministers, if it is contrary to the provisions of the Constitution, for he is personally liable to impeachment for violation of the Constitution under Article 61. An instance in point occurred when he exercised his power of veto in respect of the Pepsu Appropriation Bill, passed by Parliament in 1954. He did this on the ground that the Bill was beyond the competence of Parliament, which had ceased to have the necessary constitutional powers on the date that the Bill had been submitted to the President for his assent.

The President can also reject the advice of his ministers if he is convinced that public opinion is strongly opposed to it. The Constitution gives him the right to address the Parliament or to send a message to it. If the legislature, however, declines to reconsider the matter, and the issues are of national importance, the President can dissolve the House of the People under Article 85 of the Constitution and order fresh elections. But this serious step would involve a chain of consequences. If the verdict of the electorate goes against him, and the same Party is returned to power, it would be awkward for the President to continue in office as he would cease to enjoy the confidence of the people.

To sum up, even as a constitutional head the President is not a mere figurehead. As custodian of the principles enunciated in the Constitution, he can act independently of the advice of his ministers whenever he feels that the ruling party has lost the confidence of the people and is acting contrary to the interests of the country.

At present Rajendra Prasad and Jawaharlal Nehru work closely together. Probably in the future—when the team has broken up and such understanding might not prevail—the issue regarding the President's discretion to reject the advice

of the Union ministers will be clarified. A conflict can arise, for example, if, owing to early dissolution of Parliament, the party affiliation of the Prime Minister is not the same as that of the President, and differences between them cannot be solved by mutual discussion. Meantime, the ambiguity and vagueness are likely to continue but will present no real problem as long as the two of them work together.

The President holds office for a period of five years. He is elected by an electoral college consisting of the elected representatives of both Houses of Parliament and of the Legislative Assemblies of the states, on the system of proportional representation by a single transferable vote. The object of providing for an indirect election was to avoid an election by 176,000,000 votes—an election which was likely to be both costly and cumbersome. Another reason was that a President elected directly by adult franchise might find his position as a mere constitutional head anomalous. President Woodrow Wilson has vividly described the extent of the responsibility of the President of the U.S.A. as the result of his election by direct vote of the people:

‘The nation as a whole has chosen him, and is conscious that it has no other spokesman. He is the only national voice in affairs.... He is the representative of no constituency but of the whole people. When he speaks in his true character, he speaks for no special interest.... (The country’s) instinct is for united action, and it craves a single leader.’

Having adopted the parliamentary form of Government for India, the indirect election of the President was the logical conclusion. But in the combined vote of the Union and the state legislatures, the vote of the Union legislature has been weighted to give it parity with the combined vote of the state legislatures. The system of proportional representation secures an effective voice for the minorities.

The President’s office is essentially one in which he relies largely on the influence which he can exercise over the Ministry. The Prime Minister meets him every week, and the other ministers once a month, for about an hour and keep him informed of the important developments in their departments. All papers regarding Cabinet meetings are sent to him, and he is kept fully in touch with the policies of the Government. During his interviews with the Prime Minister and the Cabinet minis-

ters there is a free exchange of views on important matters. The Governors of the states send to the President fortnightly letters giving full information regarding the events and the public opinion in their states. The President also keeps in touch with the leading members of the public and heads of prominent institutions. They meet him frequently for advice and exchange of views. His contacts keep him abreast of the events and the thoughts of the people in all spheres of national activity.

Dr. Rajendra Prasad is the most senior Congress member in the Government. His personal status and integrity entitle him to speak freely during the interviews with the members of the Cabinet. His gentle nature forbids him from pressing his views on anyone, but frequently he induces a rethinking by the ministers on whatever decisions may be before them. Sometimes he sends his suggestions in writing to the Prime Minister, but such occasions arise only when the matters are of outstanding importance, such as the desirability of withholding social legislation or administrative changes likely to affect adversely the production of food in this country. The President is punctilious about observing the constitutional conventions, so whatever he writes is only in the nature of advice. Frequently he tells the Prime Minister what is going through his mind and this brings them closer together. Jagjivan Ram, a Cabinet Minister, has indicated Dr. Rajendra Prasad's influence in the Government. He says: 'The President of India exercises his moderating influence and inspires or moulds policies and actions so silently and unobtrusively that many are prone to think that, unlike any other Head of a State, he neither reigns nor rules'.*

The quantum of influence which the President can exercise with the Union Government will always depend upon the personal relations between him and the Prime Minister. At present Jawaharlal Nehru's masterful personality dominates both the Government and the Congress organisation. Under the circumstances the President's role is a limited one. But the personal ties between the two of them ensure close cooperation. The differences in their way of thinking have sometimes been exaggerated, but they are largely in their method of approach.

* *Ajalashatru*, edited by Valmiki Chaudhary, p. 13

As Dr. Rajendra Prasad says: 'At the meeting I found that he (Nehru) and I had differences of opinion on some matters. The differences were not so much on the Congress programme or procedure as in our attitudes'.* Their common objectives hold them together. Both have the confidence and the trust of the people. Dr. Rajendra Prasad appeals to the people because of his traditional Indian outlook, his religious approach to life—untrammelled by orthodoxy or bigotry—and his habit of finding the middle way. Nehru's idealism, his dynamic outlook on life and his deep perception of the forces operating in the world have cast a glamour round him. The people revere both of them as representing India in transition from the old to the new order of things.

In 1957, when the President's first tenure was expiring, a move was made to nominate Dr. Radhakrishnan to succeed him. But the Parliamentary Board unanimously decided for him to continue. In his own words this is what happened: 'Jawaharlal Nehru came to me and said: "We have decided that you should be re-elected." My reply was: "As you please"'.† He was subsequently elected by an overwhelming majority. His two opponents, representing remnants of orthodoxy, failed to get even the minimum number of votes and lost their deposits.

The high office that Dr. Rajendra Prasad holds has not affected his way of living. His food is the same as that of the common man in India, and what his family members and his servants share with him. He is a staunch vegetarian, for he believes that a meat diet coarsens the mind and raises thoughts of *himsa*. He has never consumed liquor and dislikes tobacco. About dress he has always been careless. Except on state occasions it is the same as that of the common man, made of homespun cloth. Being frugal by nature, he has reduced his wants to the point of austerity. When he assumed office as President he felt that the salary fixed by the Constitution at Rs. 10,000 a month, with a sumptuary allowance of Rs. 2,500, was too high. As a statutory cut in the salary would involve an amendment of the Constitution, Dr. Rajendra Prasad imposed a series of voluntary cuts. He has reduced it to half of what is provided

* *Autobiography* p. 218

† To the Author

under the Constitution, and after deduction of taxes his net salary is Rs. 2,800. He has never drawn the sumptuary allowance and entertains his guests out of his salary.*

Dr. Rajendra Prasad carries his presidential dignity very lightly; he is freely accessible to all who desire to meet him and there is no air of condescension or patronage about him. He meets the common man with the same courtesy as he does a high dignitary. Once he stopped a stately presidential cavalcade at Delhi to exchange greetings with a peasant in the crowd who had hailed him as 'Rajen Babu'. During his visits to the holy places he bathes in the river like a common man. Without any embarrassment he sits down on the ground with the people and shares their food with them. Daily he receives about a hundred personal letters from all parts of India. People in difficulty ask for his advice and aid, for they know that he will understand their troubles and show them a way out. His spirit of sympathy and his high sense of values have endeared him to the people, who regard him as one of themselves.

Despite his high office, he is as humble as a mendicant. At a camp of *Sarvodaya* workers in Delhi in 1958 Vinobha Bhave suggested that every house should keep a *Sarvodaya* pot in which all members of the family should put a handful of grains before taking their meals. At the conclusion of the meeting, Dr. Rajendra Prasad himself passed the earthen pot round for contributions of foodgrains for the poor.

He chafes at security measures which keep him away from the people. At Ajmer he found that the crowds which had assembled to greet him were kept at a distance. He came out of the railway saloon only after the crowds had been permitted to come closer and meet him. Once a year, on the occasion of his birthday, large crowds come to the *Rashtrapati Bhawan* to offer him their greetings. On the last occasion, his seventy-sixth birthday, men, women and children, ministers and peasants, the old and the young, flocked to *Rashtrapati Bhawan* to greet their President. The Prime Minister and his old friends embraced him warmly. Some brought garlands and bouquets and others showered flowers on him. Some brought poems composed for

* On the 9th of July, 1960, Rajendra Prasad made a further voluntary cut in his salary by reducing it to Rs. 2,500 per month which is liable to usual taxation.

the occasion and others brought their pledges to serve the country to the best of their ability. For hours he sat or stood, meeting each one with a warm smile and acknowledging the felicitations of the people with folded hands; and then, late in the evening, came a hundred girls from a school for the blind, of which the President's wife is the Chairman. He was so touched that he gave them flowers and sweets and patted them affectionately.

Despite his age Dr. Rajendra Prasad has been very active in visiting all parts of India, making personal contacts with prominent institutions and people scattered throughout the country. There is a great demand for him and the programme is booked months ahead. He usually spends about 150 days a year on his tours, including six weeks at the *Rashtrapati Nilayam* at Bolarum near Hyderabad, in order to maintain close contact with the people there. During these visits he reduces his entourage to the minimum. At each place he makes a point of encouraging institutions doing welfare work and of meeting leaders in different spheres of activity. A busy programme is carried out.

The President has also been active in his foreign tours. At the invitation of the Governments of Nepal, Japan, Cambodia, Viet Nam, Laos, Ceylon, Malaya and Indonesia, he visited these countries and carried to them not only the goodwill of the Government and the people but also the culture of India. All these countries had ancient ties with India which were grounded in religion and culture. His visits served to revive them, for he is the living embodiment of Indian traditions and culture. In these countries he was received and fêted with royal honours due to him as Head of the State. But in the Buddhist countries he received a warm personal welcome from the people for the part he had played in securing control of the Buddha temple at Gaya from the Hindu *mahant* and entrusting it to the International Buddhist Centre Organisation.

In Japan he stayed from the 26th of September to the 5th of October, 1958, and received a tumultuous welcome. He visited ancient temples and modern factories and travelled to Odware, Kyoto, Nara and Osaka. The universities of Otami and Ruy Koku conferred on him the honorary degree of Doctor of Buddhology.

Through Buddhist literature and religion close contacts have been maintained between India and Japan for over a thousand years. As he said during a television interview on the 27th of September, 1958: 'Nearly 1,300 years ago Buddhism, to which India had the proud privilege of giving birth, came to Japan. With it came India's philosophy and spiritual thought. Spiritually Japan and India have thus been tied together for centuries'. He was very much impressed by the achievements of the Japanese and he advised the Indian community in Japan to emulate their example: 'I also know that the people of Japan are very industrious and self-sacrificing. They have built up their trade and industry with sustained effort. They are once again on their feet after only a few years since the war. Their hard work and determination should be an object lesson for all of us. All these things you should learn and carry with you to the mother country'. He was particularly struck with the high yields of agriculture in Japan and on his return urged the Government of India to popularise the same practices here.

On the 15th of March he flew to Cambodia, Viet Nam and Laos for a visit of fourteen days. He visited the famous monuments of Angkor Thom in Cambodia and of Sisaket and That Luang Vats in Laos. He addressed the Parliament of Cambodia, attended a civic reception in Saigon, visited the University of Hanoi and addressed a youth rally at Laos. He reminded the people of those countries of the ancient ties between India and Indo-China which had subsisted through many centuries. These were based on the exchange of ideas, art, literature and culture. He spoke of the teachings of the great Buddha applied to modern conditions by Mahatma Gandhi.

During his visit to Ceylon in June, 1959, he presented an ancient image of the Buddha to the International Buddhist Centre at Colombo. The Vidyalandkar University conferred on him an honorary degree of Doctor of Laws and requested him to deliver the Convocation Address.

On the 6th of December, 1959, he went for a three days' visit to Malaya and received a warm welcome. He reminded the people that India and Malaya had long-standing contacts. At the banquet in his honour he advised the people to think in broader terms than those of nationalism, which could not adequately express human aspirations, and hoped that the

Commonwealth would furnish a pattern of One-World Organisation.

From Malaya he proceeded on a twelve days' visit to Indonesia and went to Bandung, Jogjakarta, Borobudur, Sourabaya and Bali. He honoured the memory of the martyrs of the struggle for freedom by placing wreaths at the Heroes' Cemeteries at Kalibata and Senaki. Addressing the Indonesian Parliament on the 10th of December, he felt impelled to exchange India's experience of the parliamentary form of government, which meant rule by proxy through the elected representatives. He said: 'This experiment is new and India's experience is limited. The problem as to the extent to which the elected representative is to represent the views of his electors, even if he disagrees with them, has remained a moot question. Then again Government by party system is the prevalent form, but its efficacy and its basis are being challenged'.

The visit to Indonesia strengthened many ties with that land. For many centuries Hinduism had flourished in these islands, and their dances and their legends are still based on the stories of the *Mahabharata*. Bali is predominantly Hindu and retains the ancient beliefs and customs. With their political leaders India has maintained very friendly relations. Dr. Soekarno was always addressed by Dr. Rajendra Prasad as 'my dear brother'.

In all the countries that he visited he advised the Indians residing there to consider themselves as citizens of that country. 'But do not forget India. Conduct yourself in a manner so as to enhance the name and prestige of India. . . . You are like the ambassadors of India and you must show the culture and the civilisation of your motherland,' he said.

Dr. Rajendra Prasad's visits abroad have led to better understanding of India, for he combines the old and the new in India. At the University of Ruy Koku in Japan, when he spoke on the teachings of the great Buddha there was a glow of fellowship. The President (Chancellor) of the University broke down when he mentioned the services of Rajendra Prasad to the cause of Buddhist religion. One of the leading papers, 'Asahi Shimbun,' stated that Japan had so far known India through Nehru only; but now they had also another picture of it. They likened Nehru to a brave tiger, while Dr. Rajendra Prasad reminded them of the noble elephant.

Rashtrapati Bhawan has undergone a great change at the hands of Dr. Rajendra Prasad. The old icy, rigid and formal atmosphere of Viceregal Lodge has given place to a cordial and homely atmosphere. Everybody is willing to help. It was a fine sight to see one of the stately red-coated bodyguard helping an old woman who wanted to greet the President personally on his birthday.

The requirements of the *Bhawan* have been cut down. One part of it has been handed over for the Cabinet offices. The central portion has been converted into a National Museum, housing ancient treasures of art. The President and his family occupy only one wing of the stately edifice of 340 rooms. He himself has a small suite of two rooms, with a personal temple attached, wherein he spends his happiest moments every morning and evening. The exquisite Moghul garden is thrown open to the people one month every year—during the flowering season. The *Bhawan* has been refurnished with Indian materials. The living suites of rooms have been furnished by the state governments by using local fabrics and local handicrafts. A completely Indian atmosphere has thus been created. The same renovation has been applied to the other state houses of the *Rashtrapati* at Simla, Mashobra and Bolarum. The 'Rajendra touch' has been introduced in the *Rashtrapati* garden at Delhi by planting fruit trees for the first time. A farmer's instinct dies hard. Dr. Rajendra Prasad was no doubt reminded of his orchard in the village and how he spent his happy holidays in planting and rearing fruit trees.

The President's day starts at four in the morning when for two to three hours he deals with important papers and correspondence. At nine he is ready for interviews. In between his secretaries come in for consultation. This goes on till one, and at three he is ready again for meetings and interviews till about seven. He retires early at ten. During the day he is kept fully occupied with public functions and meeting high dignitaries as well as all who desire to see him.

In his duties he is assisted by a team of officers. Secretary A. V. Pai, a senior member of the I.C.S., handles all the correspondence with the Government. The President personally attends to all mercy petitions for commutation of sentences. His legal training and his keen sense of justice make him go



Dr. Rajendra Prasad with the author



[Courtesy: J. N. Unwalla]
Dr. Rajendra Prasad greeting his honorary physician,
Surgeon-Commander Jal R. Patel.

punctiliously through the judgments of the courts, no matter how voluminous they may be. The Home Ministry advises him on each case, but he likes to be personally assured and discusses a case further if he feels that there is an element of doubt.

For his other work the President has a team of officers devoted to him by ties of reverence and affection. They share his views on all matters and are so close to him that the President relies entirely on them. His private secretary, Vishwanath Verma, handles the President's relations with the public. Courteous and urbane, he reflects the President's way of dealing with the people. His keen mind gives him a shrewd perception of men and affairs, and his vast experience makes him invaluable. The press secretary, R. L. Handa, had long experience of the fourth estate, wherein he had made a name for himself. Tactful and suave in manners, he knows how to handle the press. His genial and hearty nature carries him through all difficulties. He knows the President's mind so well that he is entrusted with the preparation of his speeches and many personal and confidential letters. He is devoted to the President and is available to him at any hour. The Hindi papers are dealt with by his personal secretary, Mrs. Darbar, a lady of poise and confidence. Her duties begin every morning at four when she attends on the President while he deals with papers and correspondence. No daughter could show more devotion to the President than she does in looking after not only his Hindi papers but all his personal affairs. She is, in fact, treated as a daughter by the President. Lt.-Col. S. S. Maitra, whose services have been borrowed from the army, is a physician who combines sound knowledge of medicine with strong common sense. From the time that he took charge of his duties—about three years ago—the President's health has shown steady improvement and it is now normal. He is assisted, among others, by Surgeon-Commander Jal R. Patel, a doctor of great experience and standing in Bombay, who is honorary physician to the President. Dr. Patel, who in the old days was Jinnah's doctor also, tells me that the President's asthma is now fully under control. Major-General Harnarain Singh has an important role as the military secretary of the President. His duties, however, are entirely of a peaceful nature—to look after the President's social programme and the management of the

vast organisation of *Rashtrapati Bhawan*, where distinguished guests of varying tastes and temperament are constantly being entertained. No matter how complicated the situation, he finds a solution for it with a smile.

The President is above party politics. He is under oath to uphold the Constitution, and to him all citizens, whatever their creed, faith or politics, are equal. He is also very punctilious in maintaining the conventions attaching to a constitutional president. Dr. Rajendra Prasad has brought to this office dignity and grace. His simple unassuming manners and his genial nature have kept him close to the people, and he shares their ideals, habits and beliefs. They call him 'Rajen Babu', for the high office has not changed the man who used to visit their villages, draw water from the well and sit on the ground and share their meals with them.

India is rapidly changing. New forces are at work, destroying much and creating more. In this age of transition Dr. Rajendra Prasad acts not only as the Head of the State but as the voice of free India, for he reflects both the will and the spirit of the people of this country.

CHAPTER XIX

VIEWS ON PUBLIC AFFAIRS

DR. RAJENDRA PRASAD is not an orator, for his speeches lack the fire and ardour which sway large crowds. His early training as a lawyer had given him the habit of restraint and precision in speech, and his experiences with the peasants had made him direct and simple in his utterances, which are enhanced by the warmth of his personality and the force of his ideas. Rarely would he attack his opponents with bitter derisive satire or assume a self-righteous pose; he would rather expound his own ideas in a deep resonant voice, appealing more to the thinking self than to the emotions. He knows how to handle audiences, for he can feel their pulse and never becomes tiresome, rambling or verbose. He has explained his technique of holding the attention of the audience: 'The duration of my speech depended upon the strength of the audience. Where the crowd was large, I had necessarily to limit my speech to half an hour at the most. At smaller meetings I spoke even for ninety minutes. . . . I could sense the mood and reaction of my audience'.*

During the struggle for independence Rajendra Prasad expressed his views freely and constantly in the columns of his journal 'Desh' and other publications. They represented those of the wing in the Congress which believed that the foundations of the freedom of the country could only be laid firmly by constructive work in the villages—by stimulation of agriculture, extension of cottage industries, improvement of the educational system, promotion of communal unity, removal of religious and caste barriers, and generally helping the people to better living. But soon after the achievement of independence, as President of the Constituent Assembly he ceased to express his views on public affairs except on matters affecting the future Constitution of the country. From 1950 further restrictions were put on his public utterances because of the high office that he held as President of India. In his formal speeches at ceremonial banquets and his addresses to the Parliament he has to act as the mouthpiece of the Government. There is no scope

* *Autobiography* p. 128

for him to reveal his own personality. But there are certain subjects dear to him, and when he gets an opportunity to speak on them one can discern the real voice of Dr. Rajendra Prasad.

He is devoted to the cause of education, to which he has given thirty years of his life, and feels completely at home when he is addressing a school or a college gathering. As he told the pupils of the Kanya Mahavidyalaya at Jullundur: 'I can never resist a call from an educational institution, because I have been associated with such institutions throughout and have always taken a keen interest in education'.*

He cannot understand the snobbishness of some educated people. Knowledge is not wholly dependent on literacy, nor is it hampered by it. He found during his contacts with men that many illiterates had developed a keen sense of learning and refinement of culture by merely listening to knowledgeable persons and had cultivated sound qualities of heart and mind. In the villages he had noticed that the people carried in their memories many notable passages from the *Ramayana* which guided their way of living.

He is a great advocate of the basic system of education. While laying the foundation-stone of the Gandhi Vidya Mandir at Sardarshahr in 1955, he emphasised the necessity of so adjusting the teaching in the village schools as to meet the requirements of the large majority of people living in the rural areas. He said: 'It was his (Mahatma Gandhi's) conviction that no public movement or reform of any kind could succeed in India unless the cooperation of the rural population of India was enlisted. It was as a result of this conviction that the basic system of education took birth in Wardha. Those who receive their education according to this system will not, after completing their education, think of running to the towns or adding to the ranks of the unemployed in the country.... The present system of education was evolved by our rulers for their own ends. This system has become altogether obsolete and must be discarded'.† He believes that the country needs a system of education which will not only aim at producing office workers—as during the British regime—but which will help people in their daily life. For the rural areas the basic system of educa-

* *Speeches* 1952 p. 180

† *Ibid.* p. 342

tion—that is, education through a handicraft—would be of the greatest benefit to the people. For the urban areas the basic system would have to be adjusted to suit the circumstances. The aim of education should be to develop the potentialities in each person and to prepare him for his future avocation in life. If spinning, or agriculture, were adopted as a craft for educating rural boys and girls, it would not only develop their powers of observation and co-ordination of activities, but would equip them with skills which would help them in their future lives, thus bringing harmony between people and their surroundings. It would thus check the continuous migration of talent from the villages to the cities and reduce the unemployment in the urban areas.

Basic education appeals to him as a deliverance from the purely bookish education. Education is warped by too much emphasis on merely acquiring theoretical knowledge. While addressing the Madras Institute of Technology he said: 'There has been a tendency of late to ignore the practical aspect of education, and to leave the students to learn things for themselves in the school of life'. He deplored the fact that 'education today is getting more and more divorced from actual life and its requirements. This in turn is responsible for the ever increasing unemployment among the educated classes'.

It is fashionable nowadays to condemn the indiscipline among students. Dr. Rajendra Prasad thinks that the fault lies not so much with the students as with the teachers and the environment in which the students are brought up. He says that 'young minds are impressionable and if the environment and the contacts are not good they will not fail to be influenced by them. It is for the teachers with their wide contacts to recapture the things which are missing today and bring them back to the students. They should try to replace the missing links and guide the students on the right path'.

The other subject he is keenly interested in is the propagation of *khadi*. For over thirty years he has ceaselessly been working to develop hand-spinning and hand-weaving in the rural areas. Before the advent of the British these cottage industries had been highly developed and the Indian muslins were popular all over the world. But the competition of Manchester, supported by the discriminative duties imposed by the British

Government, had led to the decline of these ancient industries. The tastes of the people had changed and the mill-made cloth appealed more and more to the richer classes. He has been appealing to the public to patronise *khadi*, not as an act of charity, but for what it means to a large rural population which cannot find full employment throughout the year. *Khadi* alone can help them to use their spare time profitably. It is a profitable home industry, as borne out by his personal experience. By spinning an hour a day he got sufficient yarn to make fifteen to twenty yards of cloth every year. Before he became President he used to spin for all his personal requirements, but now it is not possible for him to devote full time to it. The use of *khadi*, he has urged, would give tremendous relief to large numbers of people who have no other source of income. He appealed to the central ministers and high officials to give preference to *khadi* for the requirements of the Government, and also to subsidise the production of *khadi*. These suggestions have been adopted by the Government and production of *khadi* has been steadily rising.

As an active worker in the *Bharatiya Adimjati Sevak Sangh* (association for the uplift of the aboriginals) he is familiar with most of the problems of the *Adivasis*. He knows that it is an uphill task to bring them up, but at the same time it is essential and urgent. The Constitution had made special concessions for the uplift of these people to enable them to reach the same social and economic level as the more advanced sections of society. He told the workers of the *Sabha* that they should go to the *Adivasis* in a spirit of modesty and equality. 'If, for any reason, these people have the impression that we are helping them out of pity or because we consider ourselves more advanced than they, you can be sure that your efforts will not actually bear fruit. It is after all the fact that it is not in the feeling of pity that the spirit of our action lies. The workers should therefore develop a sympathetic attitude towards the *Adivasis*—an attitude which does not smack of superiority. They should also be sympathetic towards the customs and traditions of these people'.*

The uplift of the *Harijans* (Untouchables) is near to his heart. He has worked for the removal of untouchability and for the

economic betterment of the *Harijans*. He has urged them to be clean in their living, to acquire education and not to permit any inferiority complex to dominate them. He has pointed out that the Constitution provides for perfect equality between man and man, and everyone should have equal opportunities of progress and development. The Constitution has also conferred privileges on the backward people so that they should advance. He reminded them that 'a Constitution can only be what its people want it to be. If you make good use of the constitutional provisions you will find that they are good enough for you'.

He is keenly interested in the tribal people too, and in 1954 met a large gathering of the tribes at Tura in Assam. The people gave him a very warm welcome, for it was the first time that a Head of the State had visited their hilly regions. He assured them that he did not look upon them as backward. They had their own customs, their culture and their own way of life, and therefore they should progress in their own special way. India is a vast country with any number of villages, any number of systems of life and any number of customs. There is room for all, provided they fit into the general scheme of things. He said: 'To you who live in these hills, it is not necessary to point out that for reaching a peak you can go by several routes. We want everyone to feel that the peak is his and he can reach it by any route that he chooses'.*

If he had not been tied down by the duties of his office as President, in all probability he would have devoted most of his time to the promotion of cottage industries in the rural areas. He feels that the problem of unemployment cannot be solved entirely through industrialisation. Unemployment must be liquidated and that can only be done by the popularisation and improvement of cottage industries. He knows that this may involve the sacrifice of having to pay more for our requirements, but as he says: 'It is not my argument to suggest that it is useless to manufacture an article on a small scale when the same article can be manufactured and offered at a cheaper price by bigger industries. Our hesitation to offer certain articles at a slightly higher price would virtually mean growing unemployment for millions; and consequently forcing them to

starve. We have, therefore, to choose between unemployment and starvation on the one hand and a slightly higher cost of certain manufactured articles on the other. No wise man, I am sure, would prefer large-scale unemployment to paying higher cost. Our aim should not be merely increase in production, but rather it should be to make people prosperous and to keep the maximum number of them employed'.*

As President he has been encouraging cottage industries in a practical way. 'He first extended the patronage of *Rashtra-pati Bhawan* to Kashmir carpets and silverware and also to Manipur embroidery. An even more spectacular result of his patronage is the revival of *bidri* art in the former state of Hyderabad. When he visited the village where some craftsmen—ten in all—had survived long neglect, and placed orders worth several thousands of rupees, he set in motion a process which today has resulted in ten thousand workmen engaging in this art and the country earning about two *crores* of rupees (twenty million) in foreign exchange.'†

Dr. Rajendra Prasad is a blend of the old and the new. He is by no means opposed to modern scientific ideas, but he is equally reluctant to discard what is best in our old systems. As an instance, he has pleaded for greater Government support for the indigenous systems of medicine—*Ayurved* and *Unani*. In spite of neglect by a foreign Government, these systems have persisted because 'the people in the villages had faith in them'. He believes that 'there is ample scope for all these systems in free India' and that 'each one of these systems has its own peculiarities and its own merits. Millions of people had benefited from the indigenous systems, and even today a good many of them, particularly those who live in the villages, patronise these old systems of medicine'.‡ He has advised the experts in these systems to do more research and to adopt modern scientific results wherever desirable and to standardise the preparation of their medicines.

As Head of the State he knows the value of good administrators. Addressing the Indian Institute of Public Administration in February, 1959, he said: 'The administration in a vast country like India has a deep bearing on the happiness and

* *Speeches* 1952 p. 234

† 'India Today', 4th Dec., 1959

‡ *Speeches* 1952 p. 347



Dr. Rajendra Prasad with Jawaharlal Nehru and Sardar Patel at a party given in honour of the President
by the members of Parliament.

[*Courtesy: P.I.B., Delhi*]

welfare of the people'. He believes that 'the Services constitute the foundation-stone of the welfare state. They provide the structure on which the superstructure is built and perform the most essential function of the State'.* For promoting the welfare state he has advised the Services not only to concentrate on efficiency but to cultivate a human approach to the problems in a spirit of service. His utterances are reminiscent of the views of Sardar Vallabhbhai Patel, by whose demise the Services have lost a genuine friend endowed with understanding of the problems and difficulties which the Services have to face.

His approach to the problems of life is essentially that of the common man. Addressing the members of the Indian Academy of Sciences on the 25th of December, 1951, he said:

'I hope the distinguished scientists will not mind my telling them that I, an ordinary man, shall be satisfied only if our scientists give us practical solutions for our problems. The solutions too should be such as are not beyond my capacity to understand, the capacity to apply in a practical way, considering my limited equipment and resources.'

In his reply to the banquet speech of the Supreme Head of the Federation of Malaya on the 6th of December, 1958, he referred to the prospect opened out by advance in scientific discoveries and said: 'Science and technology have made tremendous progress and abolished distance. The natural result of this should be closer links and friendlier contacts, but man's spiritual progress has not kept pace with this scientific achievement, and mankind is literally walking on the crater of a world-wide volcano which may explode any day. Let us hope and pray that humanity in man will assert itself and turn all these potential engines of destruction into instruments of production and happiness'.

Dr. Rajendra Prasad does not belittle the advance of science. On the contrary he admires its achievements. He feels, however, that 'man as a spiritual and human being has not been able to keep pace with his own intellect, and so everything is capable of being used the wrong way. Within very recent times space has been conquered and other planets are beginning to be explored'. But, he asks: 'If we are not able to manage our affairs within our homes and within our countries and within

this world, of what use will it be to conquer other planets?''*

While replying to the civic address presented to him on the 20th of March, 1959, at Saigon, President Prasad stressed the problem facing the people of Asia. He stated: ' Within recent years there have been two developments of immense and incalculable dimensions for humanity. One is the tremendous advance in science and technology resulting in the development of nuclear energy and the conquest of space, throwing wide open unlimited vistas of progress or destruction. The other is the phenomenon of a different type altogether, which relates not so much to material development as to the growing awakening and the almost irresistible move of the long suppressed and submerged masses of humanity in the continents—particularly in Asia and Africa—suppressed for centuries by human power and submerged in slavery of ignorance and superstition. Both these totally different but not necessarily antagonistic expressions of elemental energy are capable of infinite good as well as infinite evil '.

He hopes that nuclear energy would be used for the good of humanity. Similarly, the energy arising out of the sufferings of the people might take a destructive form, but could be channelised for the good of the people of these countries as well as others. The countries which had achieved freedom were faced with a dual task of ' raising the material standard of the people and of keeping intact the spiritual values which are humanity's great heritage. . . . In our effort in industrialising and changing the face of the land, we have constantly to keep in view this fact and continue to infuse into all our artistic expression our traditional spirit of humility and integrity '.

The awakening in Asia has witnessed the emergence of several nations, but Dr. Rajendra Prasad feels that the concept of nationalism is fast becoming too small to express human aspirations. Human history now functions on a larger plane. At a party given by him to the paramount ruler of Malaya he said: ' I love to live in an age when people in ever increasing numbers are beginning to think in terms of common goals for the entire human race irrespective of colour, creed or race, and in terms of assistance and cooperation among all for mutual benefit '. His humanity transcends the barriers of race, religion

* Address to the Viet Nam University on 24th March, 1959

and nation. He feels that the only solution of lasting peace is a One-World-Organisation and that the Commonwealth of Nations may pave the way for it. He said:

‘The Commonwealth represents an unorganised association of nations completely free from each in its own affairs, and yet drawn and bound by invisible bonds which have not required any formal treaty to express themselves, and which have each absolute liberty to continue, or to cease to continue, to function within its orbit. It affords full opportunity to all to discuss matters of common interest. It may well furnish that pattern for a One-World-Organisation when ideological differences cease to play the important part they do on the international stage today and give place to the more fruitful idea of peaceful co-existence and universal cooperation’.

He has been keenly watching the working of democracy in countries freed from imperial and colonial domination. He sees everywhere a demand for the fulfilment of the rights of the citizens. But there is no willingness to perform the duties to the State and society. His personal life has been dominated by a sense of duty, and he feels that unless the people accept their obligations to the State, democracy might succumb to dictatorship or degenerate into anarchy. While addressing the Indonesian Parliament on the 10th of December, 1958, he said:

‘One thing is clear. No democratic constitution can work better than what its people deserve or desire... In the absence of a general awareness in the people of their rights and even more of their duties to the State and towards one another, it may lead to corruption of various types and degenerate into a rule by a faction or *junta*... It needs a high degree of appreciation of the problems and the willingness and determination to make the sacrifice required. We are apt, in the process of ruling, to forget that enforcement of rights is secondary; and we must recognise as axiomatic that rights arise only out of duty well discharged; and if the duty is well performed, the right will take care of itself. We are apt to reverse the process and to think that rights are primary and must be enforced. That danger has to be avoided in particular in a young and growing democracy.’

In his address to the University of Otami on the 29th of September, 1958, he showed his deep study and love of Buddhism.

He reminded them that the Buddha's teachings still prevailed in India. They had undergone a change in theory and practice but had been accepted in their essence. In his teachings the Buddha had adopted and expounded the core of Hindu philosophy. 'Hinduism has not discarded the Buddha or the fundamental and basic truth of Buddhism, but recognised its existence in everyday life. . . . Buddha is regarded by even the orthodox Hindus of today as an *avatar* (reincarnation of Divinity) and his name is repeated in many of the *slokas* (holy verses) recited at prayer time,' he said.

Dr. Rajendra Prasad is a firm believer in non-violence. He explained it to the World Conference on Vegetarianism in November, 1957: 'The fundamental thing is non-violence, which in its active and positive form means active love for others, and in its passive form means tolerance for others. In other words, while on the one hand we believe in doing good, on the other we believe in allowing others to live their own lives, to have their own thoughts and to talk in their own way and freely'. Rajendra Prasad's love of non-violence does not spring from a denial of the material world. Some critics, such as Albert Schweitzer, hold that the creed of non-violence, urged by Hindu philosophy, was based on a view of this world as being artificial, deceptive and ephemeral. They deplore this attitude as in their opinion it invariably leads to a habit of non-activity. This is not Dr. Prasad's conception of non-violence. Neither was it Gandhiji's. To him activity is the law of life. We cannot remain inactive even for a moment. But in order to be fruitful, all activity must be purposeful and pursued in a non-violent manner, in accordance with a wish to do good to others.

He has emphasised that this practice of non-violence must arise from strength and not from weakness. The believer in non-violence must have the capacity to bear suffering inflicted upon him by the adversary. His strength lies in self-control, and this can be developed by planned training, as a warrior is trained for fighting. Non-violence does not make men cowards but fearless, capable of bearing suffering with faith in God. 'In a country like India with peoples of different religions, languages and ideologies, non-violence is a dire necessity and the only alternative to civil war. The people should show more

tolerance to each other and concentrate more on their duties than their rights. If they rely on physical force, violence will breed violence and result in ultimate destruction of the communities. The sane policy is to live and let live with mutual goodwill and respect.’*

While addressing the Unesco seminar in January, 1953, on the nature and scope of non-violence, he traced the course of the non-violent struggle for freedom launched by Gandhiji and said that the experiment had remained incomplete. He believes that non-violence can only succeed after the removal of the causes which lead to violence. All conflicts arise from conflicting desires relating to material needs. The essentials of life everyone must have, but no one was entitled to have more than the essentials. Therefore, physical and material needs must be limited. Conflicts also arise owing to differences of opinion regarding religion, society or the individual’s rights and duties. These can only be removed by recognising the rights of others to have similar rights, and by fulfilling one’s own duties to others.

He had some hesitation in addressing the seminar. ‘I am the Head of a State, which has not renounced war, which has not adjoined violence, which still maintains her army; not only that, a State which has not accepted and implemented Gandhiji’s economic programme also. But I felt again that you could draw inspiration from what Gandhiji had achieved; you could also draw inspiration from what he attempted to achieve but did not achieve and left his work and his experiment incomplete. You could also draw some lesson from our success and perhaps even more from our failures.’

Extending this principle of non-violence to international conflicts, he stated in his address to the Viet Nam University on the 23rd of March, 1959: ‘Let me hope that nations will recognise more and more the validity of the common experience that in politics and international affairs, no less than in private individual matters, everyone wishes that no one else shall harm him—but that unfortunately it very often happens that everyone does not at the same time wish that he himself shall not harm anyone else knowingly or unknowingly, consciously or unwittingly. How happy should we all feel if we accepted as

* *Autobiography* p. 47

the real rule of conduct: "Do unto others as you would wish others to do unto you, and do not unto others what you would not wish others to do unto you". If this basis of reciprocity is accepted, all our conflicts and troubles would easily be solved'.

Out of his faith in non-violence comes an earnest appeal for universal disarmament. While addressing the Djakarta University on the 10th of December, 1958, he said:

'Although it may look presumptuous on my part to say so, I make bold to assert that the only effective answer to the atom and hydrogen bomb is not more of such bombs, but complete abolition of them, and that only a nation of brave people can achieve that by defying death and annihilation. . . . A nation in this age of nuclear physics armed only with fearless heads and stout hearts can, like the martyrs of old, defy the most elaborately armed nation, having at its command the most dangerous weapons of destruction. . . . Universal disarmament is, however, our ideal and we look forward to the day when it would become a reality, though I confess with regret that no country, including my own, has yet been able to achieve this ideal, so elaborately presented by Gandhiji.'

A week later, while addressing a public meeting at Djakarta, he made a passionate plea for abolition of nuclear tests as the first step towards disarmament. He said:

'Every country swears by world peace. This sentiment or policy should be given practical and realistic form of renunciation of war, or at least of disarmament, in particular of the use of nuclear weapons, to begin with, as a firm policy of action. Is it too much to suggest that the least that can and should be done is to give up the tests? It was remarked by an English or American author that Gandhiji by disarming his own people had virtually disarmed the British. I make bold to state that in the present state of world opinion, a nation disarming itself at least of nuclear weapons will be practically and virtually disarming other nations of such weapons even though they possess them. In any case, unilateral stoppage of these terrible tests cannot fail to enforce similar action on the part of others. . . . We must realise betimes that humanity with all its progress has ultimately to resort to non-violence for its survival.'

This is a lofty and logical conclusion of his faith in non-violence. There must be a halt in the mad race of armaments.

Science has given us weapons which can efface humanity. Participation in war can only result in suicide. But his voice is a cry in the wilderness. There is no real solution except in a new kind of world order—inspired by Gandhiji's ideal of a cooperative life. The technical changes have brought the world closer but the hearts have remained distant and suspicious. Until they get closer, disarmament must remain a dream of the visionaries.

A cynic has remarked that it would be fatal for a monarchy if the king had any intellectual attainments. A sovereign should be good rather than clever. But in Dr. Rajendra Prasad we have a combination of goodness and a brilliant intellect. A man of deep learning and wide experience of human affairs, he keenly watches the trend of events and does not fail to advise and warn the ministers if he feels that they are on the wrong track. With gentle but persistent advice he influenced the course of action on the Hindu Code Bill by pointing out that revolutionary changes in the basic structure of Hindu society should not be in advance of public opinion on the subject.

The recent decision to split up the bilingual State of Bombay into Maharashtra and Gujerat has been made by the Government in deference to insistent public opinion. The Congress had encouraged linguistic ambitions by reorganising the states on the basis of a common language throughout each state. Bombay was the only exception to this rule. It was hoped that by firm administration the people would be reconciled to this arrangement. A few months after the formation of the state, Dr. Rajendra Prasad visited the important centres in the state. On his return to Delhi he urged on the ministers the futility of imposing an arrangement on the people contrary to their will. But it took the Government more than two years to realise this and act on it. Meantime, many lives had been lost in rioting and police firings; and the cold war between Gujeratis and Maharashtrians had continued.

It is also common knowledge that the President's support emboldened Rafi Ahmed Kidwai to take decisive action in the Kashmir crisis when Shaikh Abdulla, the Chief Minister, was arrested and put behind bars. Kidwai frequently consulted the President, particularly on matters of food policy, of which Dr. Rajendra Prasad had intimate experience. In 1953 he

decided that the time had come for abolishing all food controls; and in spite of the opposition of some of his Cabinet colleagues, he carried through his policy of decontrol. He publicly declared that in this matter he had consulted him 'who knows all about it'.

The President's views on some of the burning problems of the day are usually contained in his secret letters to the Prime Minister. Recently, two letters bearing his views on important matters have leaked to the press. One of them referred to co-operative farms, redistribution of agricultural holdings and state trading in foodgrains; the other referred to the allegations of corruption against the ministers and others in high position.

Early in 1959 the Government decided to impose ceilings on landholdings and to utilise the excess land of surplus holders for the formation of cooperative farming societies. Later in the year it was decided to tighten control over foodgrains by introducing state trading. These announcements caused wide-spread discontent among the people, and the President echoed their sentiments when he advised the Prime Minister to reconsider these decisions.

Being realistic-minded, like Abraham Lincoln, Rajendra Prasad well might say: 'I have never had a policy. I have simply tried to do what seemed best as each day came'. Doctrinaire ideologies have no appeal to him, and he likes to attend to essentials as the need arises. To him the most urgent problem facing India is to increase food production and it grieves him that much is being done to disrupt agricultural production. Social legislation affecting redistribution of land is being launched with no regard to its effect on food production. He pointed out in his letter that conferment of rights on tillers of the soil had not led to increase in production. On the contrary, it had produced a crop of conflicts between the landlords and the tenants. The imposition of ceilings had led to uncertainty of possession and had damped down enterprise in scientific and intensive agriculture. He warned the Government that the dual policy of social legislation and increased production was likely to achieve little.

Judging by past experience he asked: 'Is it realistic to expect phenomenal results from cooperative farming societies within a short time?' During fifty years of their existence the societies

had failed to make any headway with the farmers, who relied on their age-long cooperation with the other groups, unhampered by laws and the red tape of the cooperatives. Would it not be better to build up the existing system rather than impose cooperative farms, which might dull the incentive of the farmers to increase their yields? The President suggested that uncertainty regarding ceilings on landholdings should be ended by postponing these schemes until the food position had become satisfactory. It would be unwise to mix up food production with redistribution of land.

Regarding state trading in foodgrains the President could speak with authority and experience. As Food Minister he was familiar with the subtle and compulsive course of controls, which kept multiplying to the distress and harassment of the producer as well as the consumer. Such controls could only be justified under emergency conditions and were unwarranted under present circumstances. State trading, to be effective, must inevitably lead to compulsory purchase of foodgrains, their storage and distribution to the consumers. These operations would involve enormous outlay and a large army of officials. The coercion of the producer to sell the grain to the Government would act as a disincentive to increased production. The President urged that such extreme measures were hardly necessary and that the objective of influencing the course of prices could be achieved by increasing the number of fair price shops and by acquiring necessary stocks from the traders.

The President also suggested that instead of concentrating on gigantic schemes of irrigation and power, immediate results could be achieved by subsidising small irrigation schemes undertaken with the cooperation of the farmers. If necessary the big schemes of industrial development could be postponed in favour of investment in agriculture, which is the backbone of the country's progress. No solid progress could be made without it.

The Prime Minister assured the President that in the formation of cooperative societies, the emphasis would be on service cooperatives, though cooperative farming might also develop, and that state trading would not result in socialisation of retail trade. The publication of the letters strengthened the hands of the state governments which were reluctant to undertake

state trading. The pace of legislation regarding ceilings has been slowed down. The cooperative societies are being formed by official pressure or inducement, but their value is likely to be more statistical than real. The President's views were generally supported by the Press and by thoughtful people, among whom were numbered many Congressmen whose voices could not be heard in the party. Shri A. P. Jain, the Food Minister, resigned his office and made it plain that the policy of state trading had been forced upon him and that it was both impractical and unnecessary.

Towards the end of November, 1959, the President also wrote to the Prime Minister suggesting the appointment of a high-powered tribunal to enquire into charges against ministers and others in high position. Mr. C. D. Deshmukh, former Finance Minister, had publicly referred to the feeling in the country that some ministers had been impelled by corrupt motives into misusing their authority to secure profit and favours for themselves and members of their families. Mr. Deshmukh claimed that he had specific evidence of corrupt practices, and offered to place it before an independent tribunal appointed by the Government. About the same time severe strictures upon the Punjab ministry had been made by the Court in the Karnal Murder Case. Being a man of strict integrity, Dr. Rajendra Prasad felt that those in high position should be above reproach. Mr. C. D. Deshmukh was much respected and was not likely to make such charges lightly. The President therefore suggested to the Prime Minister that the offer of Mr. Deshmukh should be considered carefully. Integrity in high office is essential in a country which is slowly building up traditions of sound administration. There is much uneasiness in the country as these charges of corruption against ministers and others are commonly made, and no action is taken. Thoughtful opinion in the country supported the President's move. The enormous extension of controls in industry, commerce and trade has opened the prospects of patronage and illicit gains for those in authority. The misuse of such authority is not rare, and the country is full of rumours of favours conferred and of fabulous incomes made by those near and dear to the ministers. If the administration is not clean at the top what will happen at lower levels? The Prime Minister has publicly

declared that he is not in favour of setting up a permanent tribunal for this purpose, and that if Mr. Deshmukh would submit *prima facie* evidence to him, he would be in a position to decide what should be done. Mr. Deshmukh, however, is firm in his decision that he would place the evidence only before an independent tribunal, and that any other course would be fatal to the enquiry. The matter is still being discussed by the Prime Minister with Mr. Deshmukh. The President has set the ball rolling and is watching its course.

CHAPTER XX

THE MAN

DR. RAJENDRA PRASAD has been aptly called ' the gentleman of Indian politics '. Urbane and courteous, he is rarely ruffled, seldom angry and never overbearing. I recollect an incident when, as Minister for Food, he tried to persuade an important person to desist from a course of action which was of benefit to his own province but of hardship to others. Patiently he argued with him while the other person became vehement and insistent in defence of his authority to do as he liked. Dr. Prasad kept very cool, never hinting even at his power to coerce him if he did not abandon that dubious policy of his own accord. Of such goodness of temper many people take advantage, for they consider him too weak to hit back. But Rajendra Prasad has a romantic faith in the goodness of human nature and believes that by patient effort the best in every man can be brought out. Coercion makes no appeal to him, for to him it savours of violence and reversion to animal instincts, and he tries patiently to bring the other man to his point of view. But if he fails to do so, and the matter is of public importance, he does not hesitate to take firm action, as he did in this particular case, much to the surprise of the distinguished person. Similarly, in 1939 he tried hard to persuade Subash Bose to desist from wilful defiance of the directives issued by the All-India Congress Committee. But when his appeals fell on deaf ears, he got the Working Committee to disqualify him from holding any elective office in the Congress for three years. This was drastic action against a person who had been twice elected President of the Congress and had just resigned from the Presidentship.

In his talk and in his behaviour Rajendra Prasad gives the impression of a benevolent kindly man who wishes well to everybody. Except when public duty compels him, he has never done harm to anyone. For his personal needs or comfort he would not hurt even a fly. Gandhiji called him *Ajatasatru*—a man without enemies. For a man dedicated to non-violence there are no enemies, only friends.

His integrity is beyond reproach. Living in an atmosphere surcharged with personal ambitions—reminiscent of the

Moghul Court—he has kept free from any such taint. He has set himself strict principles of conduct, and is known for being very scrupulous in public affairs. In the whispering gallery of Delhi, where few are spared, there are no whispers either about him or any member of his household. To seek any gain or favour for himself or his family is repugnant to him. Power has no attraction for him, for he loves neither prestige nor position. In fact, they embarrass him; and, left to himself, he would rather keep in the background. Money matters he just cannot handle. In Patna he had a monthly income of over Rs. 4,000, but he used to give it away so freely that when he gave up legal practice in 1920 he had only Rs. 15 in the bank. To the *Sarvodaya Sammelan* in March, 1955, he expounded his personal philosophy: ‘Happiness lies in giving up the weakness for property by renouncing attachment to it’.

The key to Dr. Rajendra Prasad’s character is his deep religious faith, which to him is not only correct belief but righteous living. He was brought up in a devout Hindu family atmosphere. His mother, who had great influence in moulding his character, used to relate to him stories from the *Ramayana*, and he got so fond of them that on the long wintry nights he would get up very early and persuade his mother to tell him more from the *Ramayana* until the streak of daylight appeared through the chinks. His love of the *Ramayana* has continued, and he reads it regularly. From it he has absorbed a deep sense of duty; duty to the father, duty to the family, duty to the people, duty in all spheres. These duties must be performed even at the cost of personal suffering and sacrifice. Rajendra Prasad gave up his obsession of becoming a member of the Indian Civil Service because his father commanded him to do so. Similarly, his longing to join the Servants of India Society was renounced because his family was against it. He has always asked himself the question as to what his duty is, and when his inner voice gives him the answer he has never flinched from acting on it.

Religion to him is not merely a matter of belief but a way of living. Firmly rejecting the false colours of dogma and ritual, he has stuck to the core of Hinduism. Tolerance of other faiths has become his daily practice. In the words of King Asoka’s edict, he has ‘honoured every form of religious faith, but considered no gift or honour so much as the increase in the subs-

tance of religion'. In spite of his brilliant intellect, he frequently turns to his intuition for guidance; he does not distrust reason but knows its limitations and uses it to rationalise his inner beliefs and urges.

His spiritual upbringing has given him a streak of asceticism in his personal wants. He believes with Horace that 'unless a man practises privation, he will not find favour with the Gods'. Rajendra Prasad has always lived frugally—he is simple in dress and in food. As a high court advocate he was frequently advised by friends not to be so careless about his clothes. The habit has persisted, and to this day, except on state occasions, his food and dress are those of a common man. Any show or display is irksome to him, but as President of the Indian Republic he carries through the ceremonials with an air of detachment.

Dr. Rajendra Prasad's firm faith in the ideals of democracy springs from his belief in the dignity of man. All beings are equal, regardless of rank, caste or community. Every man has the spark of divinity in him, and should be given freedom to develop his potentialities and manifest the best in him. He dislikes coercion to make men suit the requirements of society. Time and patience are necessary to enable each man to take his natural level in the community. While installing the *Linga* (the symbol of Shiva) at Somnath in 1951 he said: 'The great truth of spiritual life is that every individual and every nation should have full independence and opportunities in which he can reach the highest glory of his life to which his experience and his natural talents entitle him'.

This development can only be achieved by training in self-control and not by use of outside force. To him 'the fundamental thing is non-violence, which in its active form means love for others and in its passive form means tolerance for others. We should not only be doing good to others but we should allow others to live their own lives, to have their own thoughts and to talk in their own way and freely'.* The resort to violence in any form and the suppression of individual freedom in the interests of the State are opposed to his cherished ideals. Violence in any shape is repugnant to him, for he feels that it destroys all the good qualities in man and can create

* *Speeches* 1952 p. 236

nothing but further violence and ultimately a relapse into barbarism.

Dr. Rajendra Prasad is more of a peacemaker than a politician. He believes that most controversies can be softened by human approach on both sides; nothing will be gained by coercion. He feels sad that man has not outlived 'the animal instinct which impels him to believe that his views alone are right and to persuade others by force and repression to accept his beliefs'.*

'I have been somewhat indecisive by nature from my childhood, and to take a bold step in a hurry has been always difficult for me,'† says Rajendra Prasad. This habit of slow decision is largely due to his early home atmosphere, wherein conformity with traditions and obedience to the elders were prized as high virtues. There was little scope for personal decisions. As he grew up, a stern sense of duty held his hand, bidding him to reflect and not to act on the impulse of the moment. Duty to himself, duty to the family, duty to the country—Which one has priority?—he frequently asked himself. In a dedicated life personal desires count the least.

This gives him the appearance of being slow to take action. His cold precise intellect analyses the situation, shutting off all avenues to gusts of emotion. This habit of his had earned him the nickname of 'cold douche' from the young men. When he overheard this remark at a meeting, he explained that he administered the 'cold douche' in order to induce cool reflection and to test whether their enthusiasm was genuine or the effusion of fevered frenzy. He always makes important decisions after revolving in his mind the alternatives and the consequences, and this gives him the appearance of being indecisive. But having made up his mind he sticks to it without wavering. As Jawaharlal Nehru described him at the Ramgarh session of the Congress: 'We often make mistakes. Our steps falter. Our tongues falter and slip. But here is a man (Rajendra Prasad) who never makes a mistake, whose steps do not falter or slip, and who has had no occasion to withdraw what he once said or wish undone what he once did'.

The Congress organisation has availed of his services

* *Speeches* 1952 p. 236

† *Autobiography* p. 44

at critical junctures. In 1934, when he was elected President for the second time, he was faced with a feeling among some Muslims that the Congress had a soft spot for the Hindus. His handling of the session and of the administration during the year removed these misgivings. His services were again called for in 1939, when he was elected President after the resignation of Subhas Bose. At that time there was a sharp division within the Congress. The forward elements in Bengal and elsewhere felt that the Congress was not sympathetic to their attitude. Dr. Rajendra Prasad's personal standing in Bengal, where he had spent over fifteen years and could claim many personal friends, was so high that no anti-Bengal bias could be attached to him. He had to handle the unruly elements in the Congress and took disciplinary action against Subhas Bose—but purely from a sense of duty which compelled him to take action even though his friends were involved. Again in 1947, on the resignation of Acharya Kripalani, Dr. Rajendra Prasad was requested to step into the breach and accept the Congress presidentship. A feeling had been growing within the party organisation that the Government cared little for it. The two wings in the Congress had to work closely together, and it was felt that Dr. Rajendra Prasad alone could restore harmonious relations between the party organisation and the Government.

As a party member Dr. Rajendra Prasad has never been a fanatic. By temperament rigidity in the pursuit of ideals does not appeal to him. If the programme would involve human suffering, he is the first to search for a middle way, as he did while directing the course of the reform of land tenure in Bihar. While remaining firm on principle, he advised compromise on the pace and timing of implementation of the programme. Often questions arise causing conflict between the desire to maintain the prestige of the Party and the need of eradicating abuses within the organisation. His inherent honesty would not permit him to whitewash the defects. He has frequently turned his gaze inward and criticised the organisation. He writes: 'I cannot but record here that many Congress workers have started assessing their services in terms of rewards. . . . If a place is sought with a view to securing an opportunity for service, there can be nothing against it. But I am afraid one cannot be too sure as self-deception is not an uncommon occur-

rence. Our minds often hoodwink us by spreading a veneer of altruism to cover personal ends... Ambition has taken the place of modesty and office is considered as a means of personal advancement'.*

As President he is not at liberty to express his views on party matters. But he is kept in close touch with them, for the leaders frequently seek his personal advice. Judging by his past utterances, he must be very unhappy over the turn of events which has rendered the organisation so limp and complacent. It relies so much on the glamour surrounding one man—Jawaharlal Nehru. Rajendra Prasad is no doubt reminded of what happened in 1934. While supporting Gandhiji's decision to withdraw from active membership of the Congress, he had remarked that 'when Gandhiji took over the helm, many (able and far-sighted leaders) were content to fall in line and nod to whatever he said, and hardly thought it necessary to do their own thinking'.† The cult of personality has again been undermining the spirit of devotion to truth, independence of judgment and freedom of expression, which had endeared the Congress to the masses. Like a great *banyan* tree it now gives shelter to many, but it also shuts out the healthy sun—essential for growth and vitality.

He cannot also fail to notice that this organisation—built up by the toil and suffering of millions—has become a happy hunting-ground for seekers of posts of profit and influence and for lucrative concessions and favours. And yet it is a great organisation—without a serious rival—embracing in its ranks many who are imbued with a spirit of devotion to the country. Nonetheless, it has become a loose organisation of men holding divergent shades of opinion, pulling against each other. The Congress resembles a garment made by a skilful tailor to fit many men of diverse build and proportion.

But whatever its internal differences, the Party is firm in its loyalty to Dr. Rajendra Prasad, who has an abiding place in its affection and esteem. In this it also reflects the will of the people outside the Party. This was evident during his elections to the post of the President. In spite of powerful pressure in favour of other candidates, the Party members did not waver

* *Autobiography* p. 431

† *Ibid.* p. 391

in their choice of him as the President of India. Their faith in him was unshakable, for he combines loyalty to the cherished traditions with a modern outlook of purposeful enquiry.

Dr. Rajendra Prasad knows that the most potent factor in moulding the thoughts and lives of the people in this country is their religious belief. The life of the common man is grounded in it. There is no village—however small it be—without a temple, or a place of worship, and a *sadhu*. India is a land of *sadhus* or religious teachers. It maintains at least two million of them. Most of them have as little knowledge of spiritual matters as a cow has of astronomy. They have taken to this life as an easy way of living on the credulity of the people. All they need is the ability to recite a few holy texts. Yet there are some *sadhus* who are genuine seekers after truth, and keep alive the sense of spiritual values and show the people the right way of living.

Dr. Rajendra Prasad has great respect for such *sadhus* as have devoted their lives to the study of the holy books and embody in their living the wisdom of the sages and *rishis*. To give honour to them is our duty, for they keep before us the eternal truths which give consolation and comfort to millions and guide them in their daily lives. In November, 1952, discarding his presidential dignity, he paid his homage in the traditional manner to two hundred *sadhus* of fame and learning, collected at Benares from all over the country. The scene was reminiscent of our ancient kings honouring holy men.

But his religious faith does not lead him to renunciation of this world in his yearning for the other world. To him religious life is not opposed to material well-being, as long as it is used as a means of achieving the highest good. To the thousand *sadhus* assembled at Ahmedabad at a meeting of the *Sadhu Samaj* in November, 1957, he said:

‘You are a thinking and conscientious class. You need hardly be told that there is an intimate relationship between the world we live in and “*parlok*”—the world we strive for. It is not possible to achieve anything in the other world without setting things in order in this world and doing all that is possible for the happiness of human society.’

He told the *sadhus*, who wield so much influence throughout the country, that it was their duty to guide the common man to

lead a good and moral life. They listened to him with reverence for they feel that he is one of them.

Dr. Rajendra Prasad has made a success of whatever he has taken up. As a student he was brilliant and had won many scholarships in spite of bad health. In the legal profession he had risen to the front rank without influence or patronage. In social service he had proved himself to be earnest, sincere and indefatigable. He had to undergo many hardships, such as he encountered during the flood relief work in Chapra district:

‘Rushing to the Shahabad district on the occasion of the 1923 Sone floods, I found the entire area between Kailwar and Arrah submerged. Even the railway embankment which is very high here had been breached at various places, leaving gaps 150 to 200 feet wide. The rails, with the sleepers in some places, just hung without any support and down below was the rushing water with deep pools at places. Abdul Bari and myself crossed these yawning gaps, crawling over the rails like animals on all fours, or clinging to them like monkeys.’*

His early life in one of the poverty-stricken areas of Bihar had given him close contacts with the people. Being deeply observant and sensitive by nature, he could not isolate himself from their suffering and distress but was impelled to help them. Gandhiji showed him the way. He acquired the technique, worked it successfully, and inspired so much confidence that when the Bihar earthquake occurred, the people pressed him to take charge of the relief work, in spite of the fact that he was a sick man in hospital. He did take charge of it, and as he worked he got better and better! He was so careful that not only was the relief prompt but not a *paisa* was wasted. Being very punctilious in money matters he decided that the donations, received on trust, must be properly accounted for. In social work he neither spared himself nor the people. He would pamper no one and refused to give doles to any but the old and the sick. From all others he demanded labour in return for the grain supplied.

Another sphere in which he has won distinction is in the field of Hindi literature. He believes that of necessity there should be one language for the whole country, and that Hindi

* *Autobiography* p. 150

is the only language for that purpose. As a national language it should draw freely from the regional languages. Addressing the *Bharatiya Hindi Shiksha Parishad* he urged the Hindi-speaking people to make the language so attractive as to make others keen to learn it. The development of Hindi has been one of his pet objects. He was a founder-member of the All-India *Sahitya Sammelan*. In 1923 he was elected as the President of the *Sahitya Sammelan* at Coconada, and in 1926 he presided over the Bihar Provincial Hindi Literary Conference. He was the founder-editor of 'Desh', a Hindi weekly at Patna which had a large circulation until it ceased publication after Independence.

His outstanding book in Hindi is *Atmakatha*, which has been adjudged to be the best autobiography in Hindi. It is written in very simple language which even villagers can understand. Dr. Rajendra Prasad has unfolded his life-story against the vivid background of the national struggle during the last half-century. It has run into several editions and has been translated into English. While in jail he used to give talks to the inmates who were sharing his prison cell in 1942. These talks were so popular that he wrote out their substance and published them under the title *Gandhiji ke Den*. Other books by Dr. Rajendra Prasad are *Champaran Satyagraha*, *Bapu ke Kadmon Men* (At the Feet of Gandhiji), *Sahitya Shikshan aur Sanskriti* (Literature and Culture), and *Bharatiya Shikshan* (Indian System of Education). These books, written in lucid Hindi, show Dr. Rajendra Prasad's scholarship in the Persian, Sanskrit and Bengali languages. They bear the impress of his warm personality and have won an abiding place in Hindi literature.

Although a prolific writer, Dr. Rajendra Prasad has not kept any income from his books for his personal use. All money received by him as royalties on his books is credited to a National Trust, called the Rajendra Prasad *Granthavali* Trust. Its annual income of about 25,000 rupees is to be utilised exclusively for charitable purposes, preferably for the uplift of Indian women.

His habit of detachment served him well in prison, where he spent about five years. His first experience of jail life, in his own words, was: 'We suffered no inconvenience at all'.* On one occasion, in 1933, he was in very bad health, but would not on

* *Autobiography* p. 22

any account suggest that he should be sent to hospital. As a Congress worker courting imprisonment he took what was given to him. The jail life gave him an opportunity to continue doing social work among his fellow prisoners by popularising Gandhiji's teachings with them. He also drafted appeals and petitions for mercy for some prisoners and got them relief. Some parts of his *Autobiography* and *Divided India* were also written in jail. Except for a spell of illness, he had no complaint regarding jail life. As with other political prisoners these interludes in jail were a blessing in disguise, for they gave him rest from hectic political activity and time for cool thinking.

Domestic felicity is rarely the portion of great men. They are so completely immersed in their work that the family recedes into the background. During his fifteen years' stay at Calcutta Rajendra Prasad lost touch with his family, except during the vacations. For a brief interval he brought his family to Patna, but when Gandhiji cast his spell over him, Rajendra Prasad renounced his legal career, wealth and family and devoted himself to social and political work, living under austere and strenuous conditions. His practical-minded sister, Bhagwati Devi, often reproached him for deserting the family and placing the entire burden on the slender shoulders of his elder brother. The reproach was well-deserved and brought him much grief. But what could he do? A man of tender affections, he hungered for the love and laughter of children, but the compulsion of his nature denied him the warmth and joy of family life. He was so made that whatever he attempted took full grip of him, leaving no room for distractions. There was no place for half measures in his mental make-up. Public service—the fight for the freedom of the country—was jealous of other affections. He revisited his family only when he happened to pass by his village or when illness compelled him to rest in his village home.

The family was left to the tender care of his elder brother, who brought up the two sons Mritunjaya and Dhananjaya together with his own son Janardan. They have shown little interest in public service or in politics, and in this they reflect the attitude of their mother. Rajbansi Devi is so shy and retiring that she does not relish the pomp and ceremony of *Rashtrapati Bhawan*. She joined her husband in 1946 when he got a settled

home in Delhi as a minister in the Interim Government. Accustomed to free life in the village, she resented the escort of the red-coated peon whenever she moved out of the house. The protocol of the President's House is still more embarrassing to her. Deeply religious by nature, she spends a great deal of her time with holy books. Her early life in purdah has made her a prey to rheumatism, and she rarely attends ceremonial functions. With humility of spirit she has always kept herself in the background.

Dr. Rajendra Prasad places duty to the country above personal matters. In 1947 he would not even attend the funeral of his son's wife because his presence was immediately required at Patna to curb the communal riots. He felt that his personal sorrow was nothing in comparison with that of thousands who had lost their near and dear ones in the riots. His own grief was put aside, and he tried to stop further killing of innocent people. On the night of the 25th of January, 1960, his devoted sister, Bhagwati Devi, passed away. She had been both a sister and a mother to him, and was the only one who could chide him for his 'incurable idealism and his weakness in handling men'. In spite of their differences in approach, there was the closest bond between the sister, who was so realistic in her outlook, and the brother, who had an unshakable faith in the goodness of human nature. Rajendra Prasad was so grief-stricken at her demise that he sat near her deathbed, numb with grief, which was so intense that tears would not flow. After many hours he was persuaded to go to bed. And then he remembered that soon the day would dawn—the day which marked the tenth anniversary of the Republic of India. As President he must take the formal salute of the armed forces. Private grief gave way to sense of public duty. Early next morning he stood for hours during the ceremony, impassive of face with no trace of personal suffering. Returning at noon he took the dead body of his beloved sister to the banks of the river Jamuna for the last rites of cremation. In spite of the bitter cold, he could not be persuaded even by the doctor to break his fast of mourning until he returned at sunset after completing the funeral rites.

Next to his mother Gandhiji had the most decisive influence on him. At their first meeting Rajendra Prasad was not impressed by him. 'It was not a case of love at first sight. As a matter

of fact I thought it rather strange that Gandhiji had declined the pressing invitation from all quarters to take up the secretaryship of the Congress in 1916.* Rajendra Prasad gradually came under the spell of his personality. In the earlier years he differed from him on occasions and argued with him, but agreed tentatively to follow the line of action suggested by Gandhiji. By experience he found that Gandhiji's sense of timing and emphasis yielded the best results. His faith in his moral and political instinct grew stronger. But he was by no means a blind follower. He weighed each proposal carefully. Whenever he had any doubts he discussed them freely with Gandhiji and pondered over them and came to an independent conclusion. With closer contacts, mutual understanding increased.

There was a great deal that was common between them. Both had been brought up in a devout atmosphere and shared deep religious faith. Religion to them was not merely a matter of belief but a way of living, and they gave it a vital place in politics, which became to them not a matter of government but of men. In spite of their keen intellect they relied more on their intuition—their inner voice. They knew the limitations of reason and used it to rationalise their inner urges. Rajendra Prasad has some fundamental principles—love, truth and non-violence—to which he clings tenaciously. But, apart from them, like Gandhiji, he handles each problem not on the basis of abstract thought, but from practical experience of life. Both of them were ascetic in their way of living. Their personal wants were few, and they felt completely at home sitting on the ground with the common man and sharing his meal with him. Both of them had selected the legal profession and made their mark in it. With this common background and close affinities a spiritual symbiosis developed between the two, and Rajendra Prasad accepted Gandhiji's teachings as those of a traditional *guru*, without any mental reservation. This lasted till the end, and never was a harsh word spoken between them. Gandhiji relied upon him so much that he once said: 'There should be at least one man who does not hesitate to take the poison cup when I hand it out to him. He is Rajendra Prasad'.

With Jawaharlal Nehru Rajendra Prasad's relations have

* To the Author

been on a different plane. For years there were differences in their approach to problems, but since the day of Independence they have been getting closer to each other. Their outlook on life was conditioned by the diverse nature of their family influence and their education. Nehru was brought up in an aristocratic family that greatly admired the Western mode of thought and living. Harrow and Cambridge moulded his thoughts and made him essentially Western in his outlook. Rajendra Prasad was brought up in an orthodox village family of modest means and received the same education as other boys in this country. Like that of millions of his countrymen his outlook was essentially Indian and was grounded in religious traditions.

There are also temperamental differences between the two. Nehru is a rare combination of an idealist and a man of action. Essentially his temperament is of the poetic mould, and his imagination weaves dreams, governed by his egotism, wherein he sees himself in the centre of things, and people created for him to fulfil his dreams. He regards himself as the centre of a drama from which the men who do not play their allotted parts are removed as not wanted. His dreams count for everything, and he lets nothing come in their way. He has also the poetic faculty of imparting his enthusiasm to others and can sway minds and emotions like a magician. The power of his words is all the greater as they are touched with an ardour of sincerity rarely found in politicians. Simple words uttered from the depth of feeling and emotion find their winged way to the hearts of men. Crowds sit enthralled, during rains and hot winds, to listen to his words, and go back elated with an exaltation of feeling which they can hardly explain. Together with this idealism he combines the capacity to grasp the conditions of action. He has his softer moods, but he also gives us the sense of inflexible steel—bright, swift and piercing. He has the poet's intuitive observation, his power to visualise and also an eye to the concrete. He sees, thinks and acts on a high plane to which he invites all to climb.

Dr. Rajendra Prasad also climbs to peaks, uplifted by his deep religious faith. This gives him a consciousness of living in a world in which the movements are not blind but related to the will of the Supreme Being. His humility of spirit frees his intellect of the corrosive elements of personal ambition or

emotional ties. His devotion to non-violence forbids him to use coercion in any way, and this makes him a peacemaker rather than a pacemaker. His appeal to the people is through direct and simple utterances using their idiom derived from common beliefs.

Nehru—a *Brahmin* by birth—has developed all the virtues of a *Kshatraya*, while Rajendra Prasad—a *Kshatraya* by birth—has acquired the traditional qualities of a *Brahmin*. The urge to action guides Nehru, and non-violence is no infallible creed with him, although he greatly prefers it to violence. A great confidence in his own destiny and the will to achieve the end, brushing aside all obstructions, keep him always on the move. Like a king he rewards those who are loyal to him and protects them through thick and thin; for others he has no use. Rajendra Prasad is so devoted to non-violence that he will not compromise with it in any manner. He can only assert himself in a non-violent manner, and that does not yield quick results. A striving for perfection by means of deep insight, straight thinking and abiding faith in goodness holds him in thrall. The *Kshatraya* is concerned with his goal while the *Brahmin* thinks on a larger plane—the good of humanity that outlives man.

If the warrior will listen to the voice of the *rishi*, an ideal combination will be secured for the country. This is what has been happening. Dr. Prasad and Nehruji have worked closely together for thirty years in the freedom struggle and for nine years as President and Prime Minister. Both are devoted to the service of the country, and they share the spirit that long comradeship breeds. Their mutual respect and affection keep them close together.

Of his colleagues in politics Rajendra Prasad was closest to Sardar Patel. Very early in his public career he was attracted towards him. They had much in common. Both had sprung from the soil and spent their childhood in the villages. Both achieved distinction at the Bar. With a realistic outlook on life, they could be trusted to cope with any situation. Whenever the Congress camp was split, they invariably stuck together. As Rajendra Prasad says, between them grew up an intimacy which was to last till Sardar Patel's death. 'I cherish his friendship as one of the most pleasant memories of my life. His

gravity, efficiency and qualities of leadership inspired in me a deep regard which increased with greater association. I won his love and confidence, and he was always affectionate towards me and to Bihar.*

President Eisenhower, while proposing the toast to the President of India at the banquet at Delhi on the 10th of December, 1959, felt that Dr. Rajendra Prasad had reason to be satisfied with what he had achieved. He said:

‘And you, Sir, are the head of a great Republic. To its present world position you have contributed much. Distinguished lawyer, devoted fighter for independence, and President of India, fashioned out of years of struggle and now advancing in the light of a grand vision, yours is a life upon which a man may look with satisfaction and a feeling of accomplishment.’

But Dr. Rajendra Prasad had no such feeling of satisfaction when the present writer met him three days earlier. Contentment of mind, no doubt, he has. But he has also the gnawing discontent arising from a consciousness of how much remains to be done. India has achieved independence but the people are not happier. His dream of India—people living close together without conflict of class or creed, people content with simple living and the pursuit of mutual happiness—is still distant.

His life has been one of struggle. As he grew up his family estate, built by his great-uncle Chaudhar Lal, began to crumble owing to bad seasons and mismanagement. At college he had to rely on the scholarships which he won, probably at the cost of his health. As a lawyer he had no influence or money to back him, and by hard work and integrity won his way to the front rank. But at the call of the country he renounced his legal practice, comfort and security, family life and tender care, to become a social worker living a simple austere life and working incessantly for the people. During all these years what upheld him was the feeling that he was doing his duty, which had such a firm hold on him. But he felt as lonely as his great ideal Shri Rama, who fulfilled the greatest demand upon human nature by carrying out a promise made by his kingly father. He sacrificed everything to preserve *Dharma* and submitted to

* *Autobiography* p. 200



[Courtesy: P.I.B., Delhi]
 Dr. Rajendra Prasad and Mr. Harold Macmillan exchanging views before the luncheon party in honour of the British Prime Minister at *Rashtrapati Bhavan* on the 10th of January, 1958.



[Courtesy: U.S.I.S.]
 December, 1959. Dr. Rajendra Prasad and President Eisenhower acknowledging the greetings of the crowds in Delhi.

the rigour of the law. He was misunderstood, maligned as a callous being—harsh even to an ideal wife—and yet Shri Rama remained true to his *Dharma* and would not move even a step away from it.

Rajendra Prasad is also obsessed with a deep sense of duty to the country. Freedom has brought many problems and responsibilities. A keen devotee of non-violence, he is distressed to see how little hold it has over the minds of the people as well as the leaders. He feels that in a country like India, with people of diverse religions, languages and ideologies, non-violence is a dire necessity. The primary task of the nation is to build men, but more attention is being given to gigantic schemes of construction of works and pursuit of ideologies. Few share his ideals in a spirit of devotion. Many of his old colleagues have become votaries of power. In his family life too he finds little companionship. Loneliness continues to haunt him, and even while in company he frequently has a far-away look which springs from his habit of detachment, when he retires into his own world. He then seeks comfort in his faith in God. On the walls of his bedroom, and of his study, he has his favourite couplet from the *Ramayana* in bold letters:

Hariyai na himmat, visariyai na Hari ko nam.

Jahi vidhee rakhiyai Rama vahi vidhee rahiyae.

(Have courage and do not lose touch with God.

Whatever role He allots to you, that you must fulfil.)

Despite his habit of personal detachment, a constant impulse to action—fruitful and purposive—is the guiding factor in his life. Whatever disappointments he may encounter, his keenness to play his part, and to play it well, is not affected.

Simple and unassuming in manners, he looks like a peasant—a typical son of the soil. His benevolent appearance reflects his goodwill towards all. The deep penetrating eyes reveal the extraordinary sharpness of his mind. As Jawaharlal Nehru wrote: 'Truth shines through those eyes'.* The President is respected and loved for his intense devotion to the country, his integrity of character and purity of life. To the people he is an ideal President, close to their own way of thinking and living. They trust him and rely upon him, for they

* Earthquake in Bihar

know that he has deep roots and can resist outside pressures—emotional and ideological. In a crisis they instinctively turn to him for guidance. Their support adds strength to his voice, which is never hushed or muffled. To the people he is not only the Head of the State but also the fountainhead of inspiration.

GLOSSARY OF INDIAN WORDS

<i>Abwabs.</i>	Cesses on land levied by the indigo planters.
<i>Acharya.</i>	Preceptor; teacher; learned man.
<i>Adiwasis.</i>	Aboriginals.
<i>Ahimsa.</i>	Non-violence.
<i>Ajathsatru.</i>	A man without enemies.
<i>Ashram.</i>	A hermitage; a centre of public and social service.
<i>Assamiwar.</i>	Lands leased to tenants for limited periods.
<i>Atmakatha.</i>	Autobiography.
<i>Avatar.</i>	Reincarnation of Deity.
<i>Ayurveda.</i>	Indigenous system of medicine.
<i>Babu.</i>	Mister.
<i>Bande Matram.</i>	'Hail, Mother'—the opening words of a national song.
<i>Bidri.</i>	Inlaid work in metals.
<i>Bhawan.</i>	House.
<i>Bharatiya Hindu Shiksha Parishad.</i>	All-India Hindu Educational Conference.
<i>Brahmin.</i>	Caste of religious teachers.
<i>Charkha.</i>	Spinning wheel.
<i>Charkha Sangh.</i>	Spinners' Association.
<i>Chowkidari tax.</i>	Crop protection tax.
<i>Crore.</i>	Ten million.
<i>Desh.</i>	The country.
<i>Deshbandhu.</i>	A friend of the people.
<i>Dewan.</i>	Chief Minister; Chief Administrator.
<i>Dharma.</i>	Duty—essence of religion.
<i>Diwali.</i>	A Hindu festival of lamps.
<i>Fakir.</i>	A religious mendicant.
<i>Fatwa.</i>	Mandate issued by religious head.
<i>Gosadans.</i>	Cattle camps.
<i>Goshallas.</i>	Cattle homes, generally for dry and decrepit cattle.
<i>Granthavali.</i>	Book.
<i>Guru.</i>	A preceptor; a religious guide.
<i>Harijan.</i>	Literally, a man of God; used for Untouchables or Depressed Classes.
<i>Hartal.</i>	Stoppage of business in shops or markets as a protest.

<i>Himsa.</i>	Violence.
<i>Holi.</i>	A Hindu festival.
<i>Id.</i>	A Muslim festival.
<i>Kayastha.</i>	A Hindu sub-caste of Kshatrayas—the warriors.
<i>Khadi.</i>	Handwoven cloth from handspun yarn.
<i>Khudai Khidmatgar.</i>	Servant of God; Red Shirt volunteers.
<i>Kisan.</i>	Peasant; agricultural tenant.
<i>Kshatraya.</i>	Hindu caste of warriors.
<i>Lakh.</i>	A hundred thousand.
<i>Lathi.</i>	Stick; a policeman's baton.
<i>Linga.</i>	The symbol of worship of God Shiva.
<i>Mahabharata.</i>	An epic poem dealing with the war between the Kurus and Pandavas.
<i>Mahant.</i>	A Hindu priest in charge of a temple.
<i>Mantra.</i>	Religious teaching expressed in a few crisp words; a charin.
<i>Manzil.</i>	The destination.
<i>Mokkari.</i>	Permanently leased land.
<i>'Sadaqat Manzil.'</i>	Abode of Truth.
<i>Moharrum.</i>	A Muslim festival.
<i>Moulana.</i>	Muslim learned man.
<i>Moulvi.</i>	Muslim divine.
<i>Nagarik Pracharini Sabha.</i>	Association for the development of Hindi.
<i>Paisa.</i>	A hundredth part of a rupee.
<i>Panchayat.</i>	A village Council entrusted with the village affairs. Literally, a Council of five elected members.
<i>Pandit.</i>	A learned Hindu versed in religious matters.
<i>Purdah.</i>	Literally, a curtain; seclusion of women.
<i>Rajyoga.</i>	Used in astrology for planetary indication of a position of high authority.
<i>Ramayana.</i>	An epic poem—composed by Valmiki in Sanskrit and by Tulsidas in Hindi—dealing with the life of Shri Rama, the King of Ayodhya who is considered by the Hindus to have been the incarnation of God Vishnu.
<i>Rashtrapati.</i>	Literally, Father of the Nation. The President of India is addressed as Rashtrapati.
<i>Rashtrapati Bhawan.</i>	The President's residence.
<i>Rishi.</i>	Seer; sage; a man of wisdom and renunciation.
<i>Sabha.</i>	An assembly; the House of the People's representatives in Parliament is called <i>Lok Sabha</i> .
<i>Sadaqat.</i>	Truth.

<i>Sadhu.</i>	A Hindu religious teacher.
<i>Sammelan.</i>	Conference.
<i>Samaj.</i>	Society; Association.
<i>Sangh.</i>	Organisation.
<i>Sardar.</i>	A leader of men.
<i>Sarvodaya.</i>	Welfare of all.
<i>Satyagraha.</i>	Devotion to Truth; civil or non-violent resistance.
<i>Sevak Dal.</i>	A volunteer force organised by the Congress.
<i>Sharabeshi.</i>	Cesses on land.
<i>Slokas.</i>	Poetic couplets.
<i>Swadeshi.</i>	Local produce; made in the country.
<i>Swaraj.</i>	Self-government or self-rule.
<i>Tazia.</i>	A miniature home taken in procession by the Muslims during the Moharrum festival.
<i>Tehsil.</i>	An administrative unit of from 50 to 100 villages.
<i>Unani.</i>	Indigenous Muslim system of medicine.
<i>Vaid.</i>	A practitioner of the Ayurvedic system of medicine.
<i>Vidya Mandir.</i>	Temple of Learning.
<i>Zairat.</i>	Lands held by the indigo factories.
<i>Zamindar.</i>	Agricultural landlord.
<i>Zamindari.</i>	Landlord tenure of agricultural land.

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